From social justice warrior to Gospel-centered servant of God:

An educator's reflection on critical theory and Christianity

by

REBECCA G. LINKLETTER

B.A. Tyndale University 2014
B.Ed., Tyndale University, 2015

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Dr. Lara Ragpot, Supervisor

Dr. Matthew Etherington, Second Reader

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Abstract

Critical theory is quickly advancing out of academia and into the lives of everyday Americans. It is influencing policy, curriculum, human relations departments, and affecting the lives of elderly, middle-aged and even children. This research paper investigates current literature on critical theory and analyses the literature from a biblical worldview and personal experience living in an Indigenous community as a non-Indigenous person. It seeks to understand if, and how, critical theory and Christianity can be reconciled. The research is conducted as an autoethnography by an educator living and working in the Northwest Territories, Canada. The findings are based on personal experience and reflection, and supported by research by prominent Christian thinkers with the same values and worldview. The research concludes that a biblical worldview and critical theory are not aligned in many tenets and often contradict one another. There are fundamental differences between the two worldviews that cannot be compromised.

Keywords: critical theory, identity, Indigenous, intersectionality, oppression.

Acknowledgements

To my children: this paper is a result of my desire to better understand the Gospel and the spiritual war for your soul. I desire so deeply to show you God's incredible love and give you the tools to think critically about the world around you. I pray daily for your salvation and your dedication to serving our Lord. I hope when you read this that you are encouraged to fight back against cultural ideas that contradict the *Truth* we have in scripture. I pray you never lose sight of the hope we have in Christ, and I hope this reminds you of the crazy adventures we have had serving God as a family. To Marlene Jane, to Borden Joshua Dean, and to Liddell James, I love you to infinity and beyond; forever and always. To Joshua: you have been my best friend for the past thirteen years, encouraging me to honor God in all I do - thank you for pushing me beyond my comfort zone for the sake of God's Kingdom. Remember the first paper I wrote? Oh, how far we've come together.

Thank you Dr. Pudlas, Dr. Ragpot, and Dr. Etherington. Without out your encouragement and guidance, this paper would cease to exist. I am extremely grateful for your patience with me as I grew as a mother, wife, and student. The learning I have documented in this paper goes far beyond a degree in education and will have great impact on my children and our family. Thank you for supporting us along the way.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Background

Foreword

This is not the usual knowledge translation project, but more of a reflective journey and therefore I decided to take an unusual approach in its presentation in the form of an autoethnography (more about the format later-on). By the end of this research paper, you will be very familiar with the learning journey I have been on for the past few years and the person I have matured into. I would like to start off by giving some background information on how this all began and other aspects of my life that will provide insight and context for more formalised discussions to follow.

I am a mother, a wife, a student, and a trained teacher. I am also a daughter, sister, and friend. My husband and I moved to a remote, fly-in community in the Northwest Territories just two months after we married. We were both graduates of the Bachelor of Education program at Tyndale University in Toronto and on the hunt for teaching jobs. At the time, teaching jobs were scarce in the Greater Toronto Area. We weren't too fond of city living and always dreamed of living in northern Ontario, so we took our job hunt north and ended up very far North, all the way in the Northwest Territories. We currently live 250 km north-west of Yellowknife: about a 40-minute flight. To be honest, we thought we'd only be here for a year. We thought we'd get some experience under our belt, make some money to pay off student loans and then move back South to settle down. It is now six years later, and we have three children. My husband and I received a major lesson in surrendering our plans to God and experiencing His good and generous nature.

The community we live in is called Whati. It is a Dene community on Tlicho land. The population is about 500, of which about 5% is non-Dene. We are situated on beautiful Lac Le

Martre. Locals have cabins that dot the islands and fishing nets are set up in all the most strategic places. It truly is a beautiful community. The land and the people have taught me so much about God and human nature.

My Background

I would like to explain a bit about who I was before I moved to Whati and a pivotal learning experience I had about a year after we moved here. It will give perspective to where I am coming from and why I am passionate about critical theory and biblical theology.

When I was a teenager, I was an avid volunteer and was determined to help children with behavioral disabilities in any way I could. My determination is partly what took us so far north. I had heard that children in northern communities often had behavioral disabilities and I gallantly thought I could help them to improve their lives. I had been working with children with behavioral disabilities since I was 15. I worked and volunteered at various hospitals, schools, and therapy/respite centres. I had also taken different trainings on ASD and completed my education degree. You could say I had a healthy combination of naivety and training and experience.

I was ready for the challenge when we arrived in Whati. In many ways I was properly prepared; my training and experience was proving to be useful, and some things were going pretty well with my students in the classroom. What I was not prepared for was the pain and suffering I would witness my students experiencing. I realized that I could provide a safe and stable environment for them in our classroom, and I could be a safe and stable adult for them, but once they left our little classroom there wasn't much I could do for them. It was heartbreaking.

My first year teaching continued. There were definite ups and downs and lots of lessons learned both in and out of the classroom, but there was one defining lesson that forever changed my understanding of God. One day it clicked: no matter how much I loved these children, how

much I served them, how much I taught them to advocate for themselves, developed their God

given gifts and made goals with them, only Jesus could truly bring them healing and peace. My

goal changed overnight. Whereas before I was trying to meet all their physical and emotional

needs, I realized I needed to reach their spiritual needs. My primary goal became to share the

Gospel.

Looking Ahead

This paper documents my personal experience learning about critical theory and my

process of analyzing how it fits with my biblical worldview. First, I will explain the

methodology of this paper. Second, I will review the current literature on critical theory. Third, I

will explain how my knowledge of critical theory has impacted my worldview and how I serve

the community I live in. This section will draw on my personal experience living in a remote,

Indigenous community in the Northwest Territories and what I have learned over the past years

as a student of philosophy and education. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this

autoethnography, discuss areas of study in which further research would be valuable, and discuss

how this research can be applied for its readers

Definition of Terms

Critical Theory

Critical theory is a theoretical tradition which is critical to the extent that it seeks human

"emancipation from slavery", acts as a "liberating … influence", and works "to create a world

which satisfies the needs and powers of" human beings" (Horkheimer, 1972, [1992, 246]). James

Lindsay (2020) shares the following commentary on critical theory:

The term "Critical Theory" commonly causes confusion because it can refer to the

Frankfurt School of Marxist critics, including György Lukács, Max Horkheimer, Theodor

Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, or it can refer to the use of other similar—but distinct

critical social theories, such as those that have their roots in postmodernism, such as

postcolonial Theory, queer Theory, critical race Theory, intersectional feminism,

disability studies, and fat studies. Sometimes this confusion is expressed disingenuously

by academics who dislike criticism of critical theories, and sometimes it is expressed

sincerely by those whose fields of philosophy have not kept up with the fast development

of Social Justice scholarship.

In this research paper, critical theory will be used as the umbrella term which encompasses all

critical social theories such as critical race theory, critical queer theory, and critical disability

theory.

Equality

Equality is a difficult word to define because it is used in many different contexts. In its

most traditional sense, equality "signifies a qualitative relationship" and a "correspondence

between a group of different objects, person, processes, or circumstances that have the same

qualities in at least one respect, but not all respects" (Gosepath, 2021). In this paper, we will be

referring to political or social equality. "It helps to think of the idea of equality or inequality, in

the context of social justice, not as a single principle, but as a complex group of principles

forming the basic core of today's egalitarianism" (Gosepath, 2021). Equality is idea that

everyone should have equal opportunity in life.

Equity

The social justice movement has made a distinction between equality and equity, and it is

important to understand how the movement distinguishes between the two. Equity is the idea that

everyone should have equal outcomes in life (Rufo, 2021). It is focused on "adjusting shares in

order to make citizens A and B are equal" and often demands that some identity groups are given privileges to even out perceived imbalance (James, 2020). Equity seeks to "divide the world into competing racial groups and ensure race-based equality of outcomes, endorsing active racial discrimination to get there (Rufo, 2021).

Identity

Identity is "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). And "personal identity deals with the philosophical questions that arise about ourselves by virtue of our being" (Shenvi, 2019). When we consider our personal identity, we often consider the following problems: who am I? Which properties am I attached to or take ownership of, and which properties do I think define myself as a person or distinguish me from others? Next, one might consider what it means to be a person. For example, at what point did I become a person? In the womb or once I was born? What is the difference between a person and a nonperson (an animal or an inanimate object)? One also might consider, my past and my future and whether I will continue to exist after I die. Finally, one might consider what evidence there is to justify my concept of my personal identity. Have I established the concept of personal identity from first-person memory, or is the evidence from an external source? (Oslon, 2021).

It is my personal belief that our identity is found in God and that we are made in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 (ESV) reads, "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Michael Horton (2012) explains human personhood as a "true uniqueness [that] can be discovered only in relation to God (p.128). Furthermore: "The image of God is constituted by the following characteristics: sonship/royal dominion, representation, glory, and prophetic witness (Horton, 2012, p. 128). Bavinck (2008) eloquently explains the image of God:

As prophet, man explains God and proclaims his excellence; as priest, he consecrates all

that is created to God as a holy offering; as king, he guides and governs all things in

justice and rectitude. In all this he points to One who in a still higher and richer sense, is

the revelation and image of God, to him who is the only begotten of the Father, and the

firstborn of all creatures. Adam, the son of God, was a type of Christ. (p. 328)

For this research paper, it is important to make the distinction between identity as simply

attributes of a person (ethnicity, race, gender) and identity as the whole person not just bearing or

having the image of God, but the whole person *is* the image of God (Horton, 2012, p. 123).

Justice

This research paper will address the difference between biblical justice and traditional

justice. The definition of traditional justice has evolved over the years; however, John Rawls'

Theory of Justice (2005) has remained a constant point of reference for the subject. He explains

two principles of justice: first, "Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate

scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties

for all," and second, "Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: They are to

be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of *fair equality of opportunity*;

They are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the *difference*

principle)" (Wenar, 2021).

Moreland and Craig (2003) define justice from a Christian perspective as: "equals ought

to be treated equally and unequals ought to be treated unequally" and explain the different

material principles of justice: "to share an equal share (egalitarianism), to each according to need

(Marxism), to each according to individual effort or merit (libertarianism), to each according to

social contribution (utilitarianism) (Moreland & Craig, 2003, p. 414).

Knowledge

Knowledge can be defined as: "The circumstance or condition of apprehending truth or fact through reasoning," and, "the sum of what is known **:** the body of truth, information, and principles acquired by humankind" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

There are three different types of knowledge: knowledge by acquaintance, know-how knowledge, and knowledge by description (propositional knowledge). Knowledge by acquaintance is when we know something because the object of knowledge is "directly present to one's consciousness". For example, we know the ball is in front of us because we can see the ball. Knowledge by know-how refers to "the ability or skill to behave in a certain way and perform some task or set of behaviors" For example, we can know how to speak a language or throw a ball. This kind of knowledge does not always require our conscious awareness, it is often developed over time from repeated practice. Finally, knowledge by description (propositional knowledge) is knowing something because it is the "content of a sentence or statement" (Moreland & Craig, 2003, pp. 72-73).

The nature of knowledge will be discussed later in this research paper in more detail and various sources will be analyzed to explain how critical theory values knowledge.

Oppression

Oppression can be defined as: "Unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power." (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) "The discrimination of one social group against another, backed by institutional power. Oppression occurs when one group can enforce its prejudice throughout society because it controls the institutions. Oppression occurs at the group or macro level, and it goes well beyond individuals. Sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism are all forms of oppression" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 186). Oppression will be discussed in more depth

later in the research paper. It will be analyzed from a critical theory perspective and a Christian perspective.

Worldview

A worldview is "the set of beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality that ground and influence all one's perceiving, thinking, knowing, and doing." It is a total ordering system, extending from cosmology (origin stories) as the first principles, which informs our ontology, epistemology, axiology and practices (M. Etherington, personal communication, December 9, 2021).When a worldview is thought of as the set of principles, ideas, propositions, and claims which influence how we see the world it can reduce a person to merely a thinking thing that holds ideas, and neglect our soul (Smith, 2009, p. 32). It is my personal understanding that my worldview does consist of principles, ideas, propositions and claims which influence how I understand the world, and it is my relationship with God, my daily obedience to God and desire to gain more understanding of God through his scriptures, which welcomes the Holy Spirit to guide my actions as a radical disciple desiring the kingdom of God (Smith, 2009, p. 19).

In the remainder of this paper, I will use my biblical worldview to reflect on critical theory. The following doctrines are essential my biblical worldview and will be defined in this section: 1) God is triune; He is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14, Matthew 28:19). Mark Jones (2017) expounds this understanding of the trinity by writing: "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. But God is one, and this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We cannot deny this doctrine of the Trinity. We must hold to the unity of the divine essence as well as the distinction of persons (p. 22). The second doctrine is the incarnation. I believe that in "Christ there is one person who possesses two natures" (Moreland & Craig, 2003, p. 613). John 1:14 (ESV) reads: "And the Word became flesh and

dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of

grace and truth." Stephen Charnock (2010) beautifully explained the mystery of Christ's

incarnation when he wrote:

> What a wonder what two natures infinitely distant should be more intimately united than
>
> anything in the world…That the same person should have both a glory and a grief; and
>
> infinite joy in the Deity, and inexpressible sorrow in the humanity; that a God upon a
>
> throne should be an infant in a cradle; the thundering Creator be a weeping babe and a
>
> suffering man; [the incarnation astonishes] men upon earth, and angels in heaven. (2:150)

And the final doctrine is that Christianity is exclusive because there is no salvation apart from

Christ (Acts 4:12). Andy Steiger (2015) explains exclusivity is not simply Christianity being

exclusive, but rather, truth itself is exclusive. "By its very nature, truth excludes everything

false…Simply disagreeing with that statement proves the point: even the person who says "there

is not truth" seems to believe that *it's true* that there is no truth! You just can't get away from

it—truth is exclusive and every religion claims to be true" (Steiger, 2015, p. 80). Salvation is

through Christ alone because "Jesus, specifically through his death on the cross, saves people

from God's judgement and, thus, provides the way for followers to have a right relationship with

God through faith" (Steiger, 2015, p. 79).

Project Description

This project is an autoethnography. An autoethnography is an "approach to research and

writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to

understand cultural experience" (Ellis et al., 2011). Specifically, this project summarizes my

personal experience researching, analyzing, and synthesizing information I learned about critical

theory and Christianity. The aim of this project is share with the reader a synthesized description

of current literature from critical theorists and share my personal experience interacting with the texts and learning how it interacts with my biblical worldview. The goal of this autoethnography is to encourage others to investigate critical theory and think critically about how it affects their personal worldview and the lives of themselves and their family.

<div align="center">Chapter Two: Project Method</div>

Research Paper Framework

This research project is not coming from the critical theoretical framework, which is most often used within education and psychology. Rather, it is coming from a biblical worldview. It is important to make the distinction between my Christian understanding of knowledge, belief, and truth versus the critical theoretical framework's understanding of knowledge, belief, and truth because how we understand and value these things is the foundation for how we interact with, and think about, our reality. In this section I will illuminate my decision to approach this research from a biblical worldview by unpacking my worldview and understanding of epistemology.

Epistemology is the "branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature, sources, and justification of belief and knowledge" (Peterson et al., 2010, p. 632). Knowledge can be acquired in three ways: by acquaintance, by know-how, or by description (Moreland & Craig, 2003, p. 72). There are three ways we gain knowledge of God: through the created world (general revelation), through the inspired word (special revelation), and through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit apart from external evidence. (Barnett, 2018). Our knowledge must be accompanied by belief; "belief is a necessary condition for knowledge," but merely believing something does not make it knowledge (Moreland & Craig, 2003, p. 73).

Truth has been a question of contention through the ages. The correspondence theory of truth goes back to at least Aristotle and has been accepted by most philosophers. It is "the idea

that truth is a matter of a proposition corresponding to reality; truth obtains when reality is the way a proposition represents it to be" (Moreland & Craig, 2003, p. 130; Herrick, 2000, p. 597). This theory of truth has been challenged since we have culturally embraced postmodernism, and especially since the rise of the social justice movement, which reject the existence of objective truth (Dreher, 2020, p. 61; Ferrer & Pearcey, 2019).

The biblical conception of truth has two components: faithfulness and conformity to fact. Conformity to fact relates to the correspondence theory of truth and faithfulness can be understood as a "person's actions corresponding to the person's assertions or promises" (Moreland & Craig, 2003, p. 131).

Knowledge Translation Initiatives (Methods)

An autoethnography is an approach to research that allows the author to describe and analyze their personal experiences to understand a cultural experience. The autoethnography approach to research was born out of postmodernism in an attempt resolve the social sciences' previous focus on facts and objective truth (Ellis et al., 2011). The hope was to reveal the relationship between a researcher's personal worldview and the cultural context and the data itself. Ellis et al. describe the shift in social science in the following way:

> Scholars began recognizing that different kinds of people possess different assumptions about the world…and that conventional ways of doing and thinking about research were narrow, limiting, and parochial. These differences can stem from race, gender, sexuality, ae, ability, class, education, or religion. For the most part, those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper=classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective. (Ellis et al., 2011)

Furthermore, autoethnography "helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived, to be influence interpretation of what study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic" (Ellis et al., 2011). These attributes of an autoethnography approach to research conflict with my previously stated knowledge translation framework. Despite the ontological, epistemological, and axiological differences between autoethnography and my research framework, I still chose to use this method of research based on its appreciation of personal testimony. I value objective truth and I also appreciate that we can learn about objective truths by critically engaging with each other's personal stories of learning and growth.

The research for this project was executed in the following format. Literature was sourced based on its relevance to critical theory and its accessibility. Upon reviewing, analyzing, and synthesizing the first round of literature, common themes and terms were used to locate secondary sources. Upon reviewing, analyzing, and synthesizing the secondary sources, all sources were cross-referenced for common themes and common definitions of terms. To ensure I was not simply sharing 'my story', but that I was reflecting on my experience analytically and representing critical theory accurately and truthfully, it was crucial that I cross-referenced the common themes and terms among all the selected literature to ensure they supported the same claims and definitions of terms (Ellis et al. 2011). By cross referencing terms and common themes, I was able to look at my experience analytically and employ some structure and methodology to my research (Ellis et al. 2011). The following graphic (see Figure 2.1) outlines the process of literature review that was used:

Figure 2.1

Literature Review Process
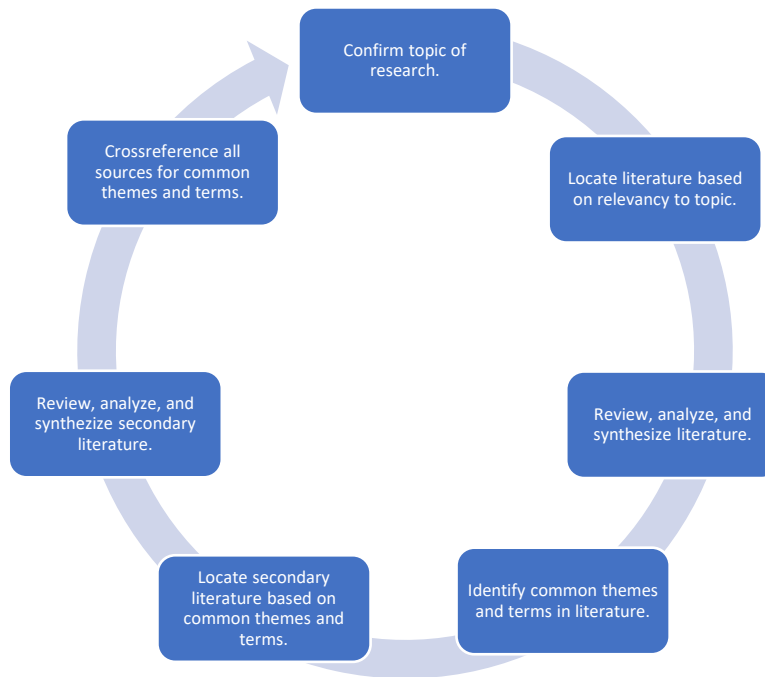
This paper was written as an autoethnography because autoethnographies enable the author to describe and systematically analyze a personal experience (Ellis et al. 2011). Autoethnographies allows the author to process and produce a piece of writing that shares how their personal interaction with a cultural phenomenon has enabled them to better understand that cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). An autoethnography provided me the opportunity to describe my personal experience interacting with critical theory while living in a remote and vulnerable population in a systematical method.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

Introduction

Critical theory is a paradigm that has taken the form of many present-day social justice movements. The most familiar social movement under the umbrella of critical theory is critical

race theory. However, there is also queer theory, intersectional feminism, and disability studies, among many others (Lindsay, 2020).

James Lindsay is an author and the president of New Discourses, a media site and educational resource that aims to be a home for the 'politically homeless.' The site's purpose is to provide its readers with the tools needed to understand what is going on in the world and be able to talk effectively about it, without any political, social, or cultural sway (New Discourses, about page). The New Discourses site defines critical theory as:

> Critical Theory in the narrow sense designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. According to these theorists, a "critical" theory may be distinguished from a "traditional" theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that is seeks human "emancipation from slavery," acts as a "liberating…influence," and works "to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers" of human beings (Horkheimer, 1972, 246). (https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-critical-theory/)

Neil Shenvi is a chemist who turned his attention to the study of critical theory and has quickly become a leading voice in the analysis of it (Shenvi & Koukl, 2020). From his vast amount of research Shenvi has found five common points (or ideas) that all critical theory movements and worldviews have in common (Childers, 2020); these are:

1) Individual identity is inseparable from group identity

2) Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups

3) Fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression

4) Lived experience > objective evidence

5) Intersectionality

These five points of critical theory will act as guideposts for the review of current literature on this topic.

In my review of the literature I identified popular and scholarly research on critical theory. The initial source for my literature review was Allie Stuckey and her interview with Neil Shenvi (Stuckey, 2020). I was already a regular listener of Allie Stuckey's podcast when this interview aired. It was my first introduction to the history of critical theory and my first time learning about the details of the theory. After listening to the podcast, I was intrigued by critical theory and wanted to learn more. I thought the best place to start would be Neil Shenvi's personal website and located the reference list, book reviews and articles on his website.

In the second stage of research, I manually screened Neil Shenvi's reference list, book reviews, and articles for their relevance and attainability. Next, I selected resources from his lists, reviewed them and manually screened their references for more potential resources. Literature was chosen based on its credibility to the history of critical theory and its relevance to modern day interpretations and applications of critical theory.

Literature Review

Theme one: Individual identity is inseparable from group identity.

According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) humans are social beings who depend on the humans around them to make sense of the world. We are all a part of social groups that we are either born or develop into and they inform the 'macro norms' that we view the world through. Our social groups fall within the following categories: race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status/exceptionality, religion, and nationality. Our identity comes from how we personally identify and view ourselves, how we are identified by others, and how others respond to us based

on the macro norms of our social groups (pp. 43-46). Sociologist Charles Cooley's (1922) looking glass theory (we learn who we are by understanding who we are not) summarizes this concept of identity well and highlights the binary aspect of identity, too; the idea that we are either/or, we are either in one group or another.

The following quote summarizes how critical theory values group identity over individual identity and how they are inseparable:

> If we are resisting the very notion of having to identify ourselves in terms of social groups, such as race or gender, this too provides insight into our collective socialization. In Western society we are socialized to prioritize our individuality. Yet, although we *are* individuals, we *are also* – and perhaps fundamentally – members of social groups. These group memberships shape us as profoundly, if not more so, than any unique characteristic we may claim to possess. (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 46).

It is my opinion that when reading literature from authors who ascribe to critical theory, such as Audre Lorde, Jean Stefancic, Ibram X. Kendi, Jose Medina, Layla F. Saad, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Desmond Cole, it is evident they believe group identity is more important than individual identity without explicitly saying it. It is most evident in how authors introduce themselves; listing the various social groups they belong to. In *Case Critical: Social Services and Social Justice in Canada* (Bell et al., 2017), many of the contributing authors introduce themselves this way. Banakonda begins by stating their full name and then goes on to say, "I am Bear Clan, and third degree Mideewiwin." Raven introduces themselves by writing, "I am Cree/Assinniboine and Anishinaabe and a member of George Gordon First Nation of Treaty 4 in southern Saskatchewan." And, Donna introduces herself by stating, "I am white" (Bell et al.,

2017, pp. 2-4). All these introductions indicate which social groups they belong to, or which race they are, and are examples of how critical theorists value group identity over individual identity.

The book titled, *Race, Class, & Gender: Intersections and Inequalities* by Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (2020) is a compilation of essays on the topics of 'Why Race, Class, and Gender Still Matter', 'Systems of Power and Inequality', 'Social Institutions and Social Issues', and 'Intersectionality and Social Change'. The book is in its tenth edition and is an excellent representation of current scholarship in critical theory, because it addresses many of the current fields that critical theory reaches to: race, gender, ability, class, and includes over fifty different authors.

Andersen and Collins (2020) write that "despite…accomplishments, race, class, and gender continue to structure society in ways that value some lives more than others. Currently some groups have great opportunities and resources, while other groups struggle." And, "race, class, and gender matter because they remain the foundation for systems of power and inequality that, despite out nation's diversity, continue to be among the most significant social facts of people's lives." (pp. 1-2)

They also emphasize the importance of knowing which group people belong to and ask readers to "remember that, as individuals, we are each located in systems of power wherein our social location can shape what we know" and that we are a "part of social groups whose ideas carry different weight within systems of power." To "acquire a more inclusive view – [we must] pay attention to group experiences" and "learning about other groups helps you realize the partiality of your own perspective" and that there are "dominant and subordinate groups" (Andersen & Collins, 2020, pp. 2-3).

These examples from critical theorists demonstrate how group identity is valued more than individual identity. The way Andersen and Collins (2020) describe dominant and subordinate groups within society is an excellent introduction to the critical theory idea that there are oppressor groups who subjugate oppressed groups.

It is my opinion that a person's identity does not come from physical descriptors, and it is not tied to whichever social group they belong to. I will explain my view of identity from a biblical worldview in chapter four of this research paper.

Theme two: Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups

Oppression can be defined as "the systemic and pervasive nature of social inequality throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. Oppression fuses institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that saturate most aspects of life in our society" (Educate Not Indoctrinate, 2020). Bob Mullaly describes oppression as the flip side of privilege, which can be understood as the benefits one group receives at the expense of another group due to how economic and political power is organized in a society (Bell et al. 2017).

Critical theory identifies social groups as either oppressed or oppressing by believing they are binary: you are either in one group or another. A visual representation of this concept is in the table below (Table 3.1) which outlines various social descriptors that critical theorists use and the binary groups that are associated with each descriptor.

Table 3.1

Group Identities Across Relations of Power (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. 64)

Minoritized/Target Group	Oppression	Dominant/Agent Group
Peoples of Color	Racism	White

Poor Working Class Middle Class	Classism	Owning Class
Women; Transgender; Genderqueer	Sexism	(cis)Men
Gays; Lesbians; Bisexuals; Two Spirit	Heterosexism	Heterosexuals
Muslims; Buddhists; Jews; Hindus; and other non-Christian groups	Religious Oppression Anti-Semitism	Christians
People with Disabilities	Ableism	Able-bodied
Immigrants (perceived)	Nationalism	Citizens (perceived)
Indigenous Peoples	Colonialism	White Settlers

It is important to also make the distinction between oppression, prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice and discrimination take place at an individual level and oppression takes place in a larger scale when "one group's prejudice is backed by legal authority and historical, social and institutional power" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 62). Because of its large scale and nature, oppression goes hand-in-hand with power. Paulo Friere (2018) writes about education as a power system that practices oppression:

> It is necessary for the oppressors to approach the people in order, via subjugation, to keep them passive…by the oppressors' depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo: for examples, the myth that the oppressive order is a 'free society'; the myth that all persons are free to work where they wish…the myth that this order respects human rights and is therefore worthy of esteem…the myth that rebellion is a sin against God; the myth of private property as fundamental to personal human development. (pp. 139-140)

Power plays itself out in social stratification and the world of 'isms. Social stratification is the concept that each social group has a different, unequal, value and are therefore stratified, which

leads to a hierarchy. Figure 3.1 demonstrates how each group has different value and the higher

valued are considered oppressors (with more power) (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 63).

Our culture is currently saturated with 'isms'. Words like racism, sexism, classism,

heterosexism, and ableism do not describe individual acts of discrimination, but rather, they

describe the oppression that takes place via "unequal social and institutional power between

dominant and minoritized groups." Because oppression is defined on a large scale (historical,

embedded, and pervasive) and not deduced to individual acts and choices, 'isms' cannot be

reversed over time or between different situations and within different relationships; "the same

groups who have historically held institutional power in the United States and Canada continue

to do so" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 66). In Canada, settlers came to escape oppression and

simply changed places once they arrived, becoming the oppressors. Therefore, building

oppression into the "very fabric of the Americas" and making it hard to reverse over time (Bell et

al., 2017, p. 12).

Canada has numerous injustices that can be sorted into six categories: colonial privilege,

racism and privilege, class privilege, patriarchal privilege, heterosexual/cisgender privilege, and

ableism and privilege (Bell et al., 2017, pp. 29 – 47). These categories are included in figure 3.1

which further demonstrates how critical theorists do believe that people are identified by their

social groups and those social groups fall within either the oppressed or oppressor category.

In the essay titled, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" Audre

Lorde (2007) explains how the differences in our social groups separate us from one another and

mean we have no way of relating across our differences. She writes:

Racism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all the others and thereby

the right to dominance. Sexism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the

other and thereby the right to dominance. Ageism. Heterosexism. Elitism. Classism…We

have all been raised in a society where those distortions were endemic within our living.

Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring differences into

pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at

all…In America [the] norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual,

Christian and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power

reside within this society. (Andersen & Collins, 2020, p. 12)

This quote demonstrates how critical theorists identify people by their social groups and

categorize those groups into a hierarchy of oppressed vs. oppressor. These notions of oppressed

vs. oppressor are laced throughout much of the literature and media published by critical

theorists. It is sometimes clearly laid out like in the quote above, but it is most often noticed in

the language.

It is my opinion that oppression cannot be defined and labelled according to physical

descriptors (race, class, gender). In chapter four of this research paper, I will reflect on

oppression from my biblical worldview and discuss how it can be defined and understood

through scripture.

Theme three: Fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression

Critical theorists across the various movements and ideologies seek to eradicate the

perceived oppression and ensure everyone has equal outcomes in life. Max Horkheimer's

writings were "largely responsible for developing the epistemological and methodological

orientation of Frankfurt critical theory" and influenced later critical theorists (Bohman, 2005).

He wrote the following in 1927: "A theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human

'emancipation from slavery', acts as a 'liberating…influence', and works 'to create a world in which satisfies the needs and powers of human beings" (Horkheimer, 1927, [1992, 246]).

The critical social justice movement is our cultures way of meeting the standards Horkeimer describes above. Critical social justice adopts specific perspectives that recognize society is stratified in significant ways across all social group lines (race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability) and recognizes that inequality is structural (built into our society), and it aims to change the inequalities (Matsuda et al., 1993, pp. 6-7). It also believes anyone who supports social justice must be engaged in self-reflection to understand their position within social groups and act accordingly to challenge any inequalities (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Bell et. al (2017) ask the following questions: "What knowledge and understanding will move us toward a society that implements political, economic, and social justice?" and, "What action can we take to contribute to this change?" (p. 1). After discussing how oppression is woven deep into Canadian history and has settled itself into politics and economics, they describe the need for a move "toward liberation" (p. 160). And, how the complexity of oppression toward Indigenous peoples means non-Indigenous people will never be able to escape their colonial privilege, even despite a dedication to freeing Indigenous peoples from oppression (p. 162). Non-Indigenous people must continually evaluate themselves and their various privileges by completing a "Cultural Competence Self-Audit" (p. 174). This audit requires the non-Indigenous person to critically evaluate themself regarding how "harmful" or "innovative" they are before entering into a new situation or setting with a marginalized group (pp. 175-177). This emphasis on self-evaluation supports the critical theory idea that it is one's fundamental moral duty to free oppressed groups from their oppression.

It is my opinion that our fundamental moral duty is not to free oppressed groups from their oppression. It is my belief that only salvation through Christ can save someone from their oppression and as a Christian, it my responsibility to obey God and share the Gospel with others. In chapter four of research paper, I will explain my understanding moral duties from a biblical worldview.

Theme four: Lived experience > objective evidence

Critical theory relies on the understanding that truth claims come from lived experience and are socially constructed. Lived experience refers to a person's understanding of reality based on self-reflection of their life's experiences, or their social group's experiences. And socially constructed knowledge reflects the values and interests of whoever produces it (Kang, 2013; Andersen & Collins, 2016; Bell et al., 2017; Rothman, 2019; Kendi, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Lived experience and socially constructed knowledge are subjective types of truth since they can evolve over time and rely on a specific time, place, and culture to be accepted as truth. For example, experiential data can be gathered through descriptions of other' experiences (biography), interviews, journals, works of art, poetry, and literary texts (Magrini, 2012, p. 5). Knowledge, therefore, is not the "result of a rational, objective, and value-neutral process…removed from any political agenda. Objectivity is even challenged by critical theorists as being desirable or possible to obtain (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

To further explain the importance and superiority of subjective knowledge, or lived experience, Sensoy and DiAngelo explain the difference between discoverable laws of the natural world and knowledge. According to them, even science is socially constructed. They use the example of a tree. A tree is a physical fact that can be observed, yet they believe that our

perception of the tree has more value than its physical nature. For example, whether it is a large tree or a small tree, whether it is a limited resource or a sacred symbol of life; who owns the tree or who has the right to cut it down and profit from it? According to Sensoy and DiAngleo, all these knowledge claims are a by-product of the specific time, place, and cultural context we are in, thus the tree cannot objectively be a tree (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, pp. 15-16). Knowledge is also not abstract and must be reconstructed; it is not just "content and information", it must be evolving and responsive to what you are learning about groups of other races, classes and genders (Andersen & Collins, 2020, p. 3).

Bell et al. (2017) explain that knowledge is the third of four principles that make up the Four Foundational Principles of Indigenous Traditional Practices (p. 4). The other three principles are: kindness, honesty, and strength, and knowledge is the principle they refer to as 'sharing'. The sharing principle requires knowledge to be shared with others and explains that it "emerge[s] from our beliefs, values, in relationship, and through our experience (Bell et al., 2017, pp. 7-8). Bell (2017) continues to describe knowledge in the following quote:

> This is not knowledge, as might be seen today by the academy. This knowledge that is about belief, place, belonging, value, and relationship. This knowledge and understanding is about the human need to be seen, heard, to come to know, understand, and contribute. Knowledge and understating is about seeking, protecting, nurturing, and sustaining life. It is about discovering our purpose, our place in community, in society, and in creation. (p. 8)

Gottesman (2016) supports the notion that critical theory values subjective truth when he writes about critical education and its goal to expose how relations of power and inequality are woven into education: "this more robust understanding involves fundamental transformations of

the underlying epistemological and ideological assumptions that are made about what counts as

official or legitimate knowledge and who holds it" (p, xii).

From this diverse representation of critical theorists, it is evident that lived experience takes

precedence over objective evidence because they share their belief that knowledge is self-

constructed, evolving, and dependent on the culture, time, location.

It is my opinion that subjective claims are insufficient sources of truth and objective truth

ought to be pursued. I will share my reflection on subjective and objective truth in more depth in

chapter four of this research paper.

Theme five: Intersectionality

Intersectionality is crucial to the quest for critical social justice because "social inequality cannot

be understood by examining categories such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status in

isolation (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 177). Intersectionality can be described the following

way:

> The idea that identity cannot be fully understood via a single lens such as gender, race,
>
> or class alone –what legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) called a 'single axes
>
> framework' (p. 139). Rather, our identities and the social meaning attributed to them
>
> must be understood in their interdependence on one another; identity is multidimensional.
>
> (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 175)

Andersen and Collins (2020) describe intersectionality as the intersecting experience of

race, class, and gender affecting all aspects of human life and "simultaneously structure[ing] the

experiences of all people in this society" (p. 4). They break the intersectional framework down

into four parts. First, they emphasize social structure by using a "matrix of domination" to see

"social structure as having multiple, interlocking levels of domination that stem from the societal

configuration of race, class, and gender relations" (p. 4). Yosso (2006) supports this notion of domination by acknowledging the "inextricable layers of racialized subordination" based on our physical descriptors and social groups.

The second part of the intersectional framework according to Anderson and Collins (2020) is that using an intersectional framework to analyze race, class, and gender within the "context of social structure helps us understand how race, class, and gender, are manifested differently, depending on their configuration with the others" (p. 5). Kumasi (2011) confirms this component of intersectionality by arguing that race does not "function independently of other modes of domination, such as classism or sexism" and that critical theory is skeptical of any sociological analyses that focuses only on race without recognizing its multiple layers (p. 209).

The third part of the intersectional framework according to Anderson and Collins (2020) is an emphasis on the intersection of race, class, and gender because these systems of power have had and continue to have special impact in the United States (p. 5). Intersectionality also recognizes the intersection of race, class, and gender as a structural phenomenon [and] analyzes the hierarchies and systems of domination that permeate society and limit our ability to achieve true democracy and social justice (Andersen & Collins, 2020; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020).

And the final part of the intersectional framework according to Anderson and Collins (2020) "is the idea that no one of these social facts [race, class, gender] singularly determines anyone's lived experiences" (p. 34). Gottesman (2016) shares how many feminist scholars challenged the idea of a "universal rational knowing subject that exists outside of social and political context" and without gendered, raced, and classed identity (pp.97-98). They critiqued objectivity and believed knowledge had to be connected to all aspects of a person's identity.

Intersectionality can present itself though different power structures and 'isms. It is important to understand how 'isms and power structures interact with one another and "operate in our own individual lives." Multiple identities" make up our "social location" and no two people are alike because our multiple identities that stem from cultural backgrounds, class position, shades of skin colour, sexual orientations, gender identifications, ethnicities, ages, physical or mental abilities, and any other "intersecting dynamics of privilege and oppression" (Bell et al., 2017, pp. 160-161).

The literature reviewed above demonstrates how intersectionality embraces the idea people's lives consist of many different components which all contribute to how they experience and interact with their life. It uses this understanding to attribute power to different identities and even more power when different identities collide and work together or influence one another (Sherwood, 2014). James Lindsay (2020) uses the following example to clearly describe intersectionality:

> Somebody could be hit by a combination of both racism and sexism at the same time and this experience be more complex than either prejudice on its own…Not only do black women have to deal with racism as being black and sexism as being a woman, but also the additional issues of specific prejudices about black women in particular *and* the burden of not knowing which of these *three* possible axes of discrimination is affecting her. (New Discourses, Intersectionality)

It is my opinion that intersectionality complicates human relationships and rather than bridge a gap between differing people, it creates a fragile environment which is hard to navigate. In chapter four of this research paper, I will reflect on intersectionality and Christianity more in depth.

Summary

In this literature review, numerous sources from critical theorists have been reviewed and synthesized into five categories: individual identity is inseparable from group identity; oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups; fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression; lived experience > objective evidence; and intersectionality. These five ideas are the common tenets of critical theory across its various fields. Next, I will reflect on these five categories/ideas and provide my understanding of how they interact with a biblical worldview.

Chapter Four: Knowledge Translation Project

Summary of Research Paper

The final section of this paper will use the same five points from Neil Shenvi that were used in the literature review as guideposts for my personal reflections. I will be deliberating each of the five points and will discuss how they may not actually support vulnerable populations as well as critical theorists intend for them to.

I feel it is crucial for me to share what I have learned because the utilisation of critical theory is seeping into all areas of our lives. It is in corporate advertising, job training, public school curriculums, all over social media and in government policy (Rufo, 2021). However, it is important to highlight that critical theory is not always viewed in a positive light. As a Christian, and as a mother, I know I need to share how critical theory contradicts what biblical scripture teaches us and how easily it can be mistaken for the Jesus centred Gospel Christians strive to share. Below (see Table 4.1) is a diagram copied from Neil Shenvi (2021c) which compares Christianity to Critical theory and clearly lays out how the two worldviews are distinct.

Table 4.1

Christianity and Critical Theory (Neil Shenvi, 2021c)

Christianity	Creation	Fall	Redemption	Restoration
Critical Theory	N/A	*Patriarchy* *White supremacy* *Heteronormativity* *Toxic masculinity* OPPRESSION *Classism* *Ageism* *Ableism* *Cisgenderism*	*Protest* *Resistance* ACTIVISM *Education* *Awareness*	*Equality* *Power reversal* LIBERATION *Justice* *Diversity*

The following sections will unpack the five themes of critical theory that were explored in the literature review. I will draw on my personal experience living in Whati, wisdom from other Christian thinkers and writers, and from biblical scripture.

Theme 1: Individual identity is inseparable from group identity

The idea that individual identity is inseparable from group identify reminds me of my students and their experience of maturing into an adult. Thomas Sowell (2002) eloquently explains how an individual's identity can be consumed by their social group; much like how my students' primary identity is indigenous. This group identity often consumes and cripples their abilities, talents, and dreams. Author and political commentator Candace Owens (2020) writes about growing up as a black American and the identity of her social group: "To be a black American means to have your life narrative predetermined: a routine of failure followed by alleged blamelessness due to perceived impotence. It means constant subjection to the bigotry of lowered expectations, a culture of pacifying our shortcomings through predisposition" (p. 2).

In the past, when I have asked students about their aspirations, or where they see themselves in ten years, they most often cannot picture themselves outside of Whati and if I push their ideas beyond Whati, there is a sense of shame. Some students aspire to be a nurse or an RCMP officer and return to Whati to police or nurse. Whati is their home, they have experienced so much joy and pain here and they want to help their families. But some of their motivation to pursue those careers is because they have been told that since they are Indigenous, they will secure a job quickly. To encourage someone to pursue a career simply because their social group status (Indigenous) will ensure they are successful, implies their group identity is more important than their personal identity and their unique gifts, callings, and time and effort.

Thomas Sowell describes a second layer of complexity that comes with group identity: the guilt (Sowell, 2002, p. 83). I didn't really see guilt in my students until Sowell used the black population in the United States to explain the phenomenon. He explains how young black students who wish to get an education can be accused of acting white betraying their race. They are subject to intimidation, violence, and are often "held back by fear of the envy and resentment of their peers" (p.41). Helmut Schoeck (1966) calls this pattern of behavior, "loathsomely insidious" (p. 292).

I have come to realise that there is this common identity among my students that they are Indigenous, and they will live in Whati for the remainder of their lives, and they will continue with the generational patterns that we have already witnessed. The pressure to remain in that Indigenous identity, and not break the cycle, creates a lot of stress for someone who steps out of the boundaries. If one of my students is successful in school, works hard, and decides to go to college they are automatically ostracized. This person would be breaking the group identity and be mocked for it. There is little room or support for independent identity. It is my experience that

this often causes the individual to try less in school or to stop working or to back out of going to college. Further research could investigate the collectivist nature of Indigenous cultures and how that affects Indigenous peoples as they strive to live in an individualistic westernized culture.

The Whati community is very close. It is closer than anything I have ever experienced in suburban Ontario. There is an unmistakable bond that is formed when a group of families has such a close-knit history and are physically close. We do live in a remote community of only 500 people. It only takes about eight minutes to walk across town. Despite the close bond and understanding of one another, there is little support for independent identity. It is almost like breaking the cycle, betrays the group. The connection people have to their group's identity can be so strong that is affects how they choose to live their lives. A person's group identity has the potential to persuade them to think a certain way about their circumstances, to develop habits in how they react to situations that reflect the group identity more than their individual identity, and to affect the choices they make about education, careers, and family. There is value in having a community of people with shared beliefs and values, but it can be easy to slip into making life choices based on the group mentality, rather than our independent thinking.

When I was a teenager and someone asked me to describe myself, I probably would have started by describing my two parents and two brothers, then moved on to the fact that I come from Scottish descent. I would have continued to describe how I spent my days and what my favourite activities were. As a child and teenager my identity was rooted in my family and friends. As I have matured, so has my identity. And not just because I am in a completely different stage of life. It has become evident to me over the past few years just how crucial our identity is. My students were my first encounter with struggles surrounding identity and then as I

researched critical theory and learned about these five key points, it became even more important.

If you asked me to describe myself now, I would begin by saying that I am a child of God and follower of Jesus Christ, and then describe my family. It is important to me that I teach my children they are children of God as well because all attempts to find their identity in earthly things or groups will ultimately fail them. God created my children; He knows them better than anyone, even better than I do. He knows their hearts, their minds, their gifts, their potential, and their sins, and just as He promises in scripture, He will always love them. Nothing the world provides can compare to that.

It is easy to get caught up in a group identity and over time change to fit that group's agenda or 'type'. One might lose track of who they are and their purpose. For example, even as a mother I can get caught up in the 'mom' group identity. This club that mothers belong to where they have permission to complain about their kids, to drink away the pains of the day, or deserve breaks and rewards for being patient. When I remove myself from that group identity and put myself back in the arms of my heavenly Father and remember that first and foremost I am His child and I am living to share the gospel, my priorities and my attitude change dramatically for the better. I no longer think to myself, "I deserve a break," " I should treat myself to ___for enduring that crazy afternoon," and shift to thinking, "how can I show God's love to my children in this difficult moment," "God please give me more patience in this moment as I am sinfully being selfish," "God thank you so much for the ability to be with my children all day and to teach them about who you are throughout everything we do." As you can see, it is easy for me to lose track of my personal values and prioritize my social group's identity (Stuckey, 2020).

This prioritization of group identity is all over the media and even in school classrooms. As a society we are being pegged as a white person, a person with a disability, a black person, a transgender person, a Christian, or even just as a male or female (although those terms are becoming more and more taboo). Slotting people into different groups and expecting them to embrace that group's identity creates a complex situation as people navigate the reality that they belong to multiple social groups. Valuing a group identity over a individual identity creates an environment in which people are underappreciated for their unique thoughts, talents, and feelings.

Theme 2: Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups

My biblical worldview leads me to believe that we are all oppressed because we are all sinners and "fall short of the glory of God." And yet, we "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23, ESV). If oppression is understood as sin against God, then scripture tells us that *all* are sinners, and therefore all oppressed. This does not negate the fact that no two humans have the same life experience and there is no doubt some people live more difficult lives than others. However, if oppression is understood as sin, then we are equally oppressed. Today, racism would be considered oppression and some people would claim racism is about institutional power – "Today 'new racism' practices have emerged that are more sophisticated and subtle than those typical of the Jim Crow era [but are] s effective as the old one in maintaining the racial status quo" (Bonilla-Silva, p. 25) – however, Christians should view racism as a sin, "structures and systems can encourage and promote sin, but they don't commit sin: human beings do" (Shenvi, 2021b). The biblical worldview must keep the focus on individual who is "guilty before God for their thoughts, words and deeds" rather than on large systems of power or social groups (Shenvi, 2021b).

If I compare my personal descriptors (white, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian, citizen, and white settler) to figure 3.1 then I classify as an oppressor. My female gender is the only category from figure 3.1 that classifies me as oppressed. It is oversimplifying someone's life to try and calculate their oppression based off their descriptors. For example, I have now lived in a remote indigenous community for six years and I have unfortunately experienced what some would call oppression. I have been disrespected, falsely accused, and been denied opportunities because of my descriptors. Critical theory seeks to label people from their descriptors and uses those labels to determine if a person is oppressed or an oppressor. It fails to consider how unique personalities, values, or family history contributes to a person's character.

My husband is the principal of the Jk-12 school in our small community. The community has about 500 people, most of whom do not have a high school diploma and only about 15% of the adult population have full time work. My husband is responsible for hiring certified teachers, custodial staff, administrative staff, and relief staff for the school. Hiring for the certified teaching positions has caused a lot of tension in our community and surrounding communities. To fulfill the position a candidate must have a Bachelor of Education degree, however members of our community feel a degree is not necessary. Many community members would prefer a local to fulfill the position, regardless of their education and experience. The desire for a local to fill the position stems from the belief that they *deserve* the job because they are local to the community. Hiring for the teaching positions get increasingly difficult when community members also express concern about the quality of their child's education. Rightfully so, parents would like the best interest for their children, and this *usually* calls for a highly trained and experienced teacher. These two expectations – locals to be hired as teachers and high-quality education – converge and create a dilemma. It is unfortunately not the case right now that highly

trained and experienced teachers can be hired locally. It would be wonderful if it could be in the future.

Take a step back from this example and it can be seen as an 'oppressed' person (Indigenous) requesting a job despite being underqualified and underexperienced, and an 'oppressor' receiving a job for being appropriately qualified and experienced. However, critical theorists would focus more on the oppressor vs. oppressed dynamic rather than the underqualified vs. qualified dilemma. By making the conversation about oppressed vs. oppressor it is focusing on the hierarchy of social groups and creating a further divide amongst people (Andersen & Collins, 2020, p. 7).

If I embraced the label as an oppressor in my current community, I would have lost so many opportunities to grow relationships and learn. When I first moved to Whati, it was difficult to adjust and build relationships with new friends. Unfortunately, Canada's history has created a stigma around white people in our community and because many teachers move from the south for a quick adventure or to make a sizable income for a year, the lack of trust toward outsiders is great.

However, time and respect can go a long way in developing relationships. I have developed many wonderful friendships over the years with community members who chose to acknowledge our differences and seek to get to know me. Our mutual respect and appreciation of each other has led to wonderful and supportive friendships.

The details of my upbringing and the details of my friends' upbringing are quite different. But, when you stand back and look at the big picture, we have a lot in common. For example, we all have families with some elements of dysfunction that are still affecting us in our adult life, we have both dealt with insecurity and second guessing our decisions, we both long for a loving and

respectful family of our own, and we both have our own internal struggles (better known as our sinful nature). We also both struggle with the reality of living in a physically remote community which also endures long harsh winters. But we both understand that we can support one another, share our struggles and triumphs with one another and grow together. None of that has to do with one being oppressed by the other, and I am sure I would not have the friendships I have in Whati if we abided by critical theory's attempt to separate us as oppressed vs. oppressor.

Theme 3: Fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression

I used to believe my fundamental moral duty was to free children with disabilities from their 'oppression'. I didn't personally call the children's' difficulties 'oppressions', and I did not refer to the children as oppressed, but according to table 3.1 they would classify as oppressed. My goals were to relieve the difficulties of their daily life so they could more easily be who God created them to be and to help society better understand the worth of these children.

I have realized that if we believe our fundamental moral duty is to relieve groups from their oppression, we are putting a lot of faith in ourselves to 'save' people. In contrast, my biblical worldview leads me to understand that only Christ can save us from our oppression and therefore I should be teaching people about Christ rather than personally trying to save them. For example, in the classroom I tried to be as compassionate, forgiving, and supportive as possible for my students but ultimately my ability to free the children from their oppression was inadequate.

It is difficult for me to reconcile Christianity and critical theory because of its emphasis on oppression and expectation that we are responsible for alleviating each other's oppression even when we are not directly responsible. My biblical worldview leads me to rest in confidence that Jesus saved us from our oppression by dying on the cross for our sins. Everyone is invited to

accept Jesus' gift of forgiveness and it is once we accept Him as our saviour that we will be freed from our oppression, and by sharing our faith and salvation we can help others experience the same salvation.

Theme 4: Lived experience > objective evidence

When I was in my undergraduate studies, I was required to take a second-year philosophy course titled, "Critical Thinking." I can say confidently the professor of that class and the lessons taught were my first step on the track I am on now. One of our first lessons was about objective truth and subjective truth. In *The Many Worlds of Logic,* a subjective connotation of a word refers the attributes a particular person *believes* to be possessed by that word and an objective connotation of a word refers to the attributes *actually* possessed by the word (Herrick, 2000, p. 231). The concept of objectivity and subjectivity was completely new to me, but once I grasped the concept that subjective truth is self-refuting I never looked back and the way I thought about life and truth was forever changed.

Subjective truth is about a person's own experience, feelings, or personal preference (Noyes, 2020). Our culture has coined the phrases 'you do you' and 'my truth' as signs of embracing subjective truth. For example, author and motivational speaker Brené Brown (2019) writes in her book *Braving the Wilderness* about finding our truth in our hearts determining our worth for ourselves. Her ideas represent the reality of subjective thinking because it suggests people create their own truth based on their own experience and feelings. On the contrary, C.S. Lewis (2015) argues in *Mere Christianity* for the existence of a universal moral law that all human beings, regardless of culture, inherently aim to follow. And Allie Beth Stuckey (2020) writes, "With no transcendent moral law or lawgiver, we are all our own gods, and no one can

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say who's right and who's wrong. This puts our lives in a tailspin on chaos" (p. 60). It is my opinion that subjective truth is a slippery slope and ought to considered carefully.

Critical theory values subjective truth and dismisses the notion of objective truth (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). However, by making a claim that subjective truth is superior, critical theory is, itself, making an objective statement – it is therefore, self-refuting because it is defeated by its own criteria.

Within education there has been a shift toward subjective truth. For example, the Ontario Curriculum (2019) defines gender identity as the following:

> According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission: each person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is their sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person's gender identity may be the same as or different from their birth-assigned sex. People may see their gender identity as fluid and moving between different genders at different times in their life. (From Policy on Preventing Discrimination because of Gender Identity and Gender Expression). (p. 307)

And the curriculum document (The Ontario Curriculum, 2019) defines gender expression as:

> According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission: how a person publicly presents or expresses their gender. This can include behaviour and outward appearance, such as dress, hair, make-up, body language and voice. A person's chosen name and pronoun are also common ways people express their gender. Others perceive a person's gender through these attributes. (From Policy on Preventing Discrimination because of Gender Identity and Gender Expression). (p. 307)

This curriculum is suggesting to children in public school that their gender is subjective. That it is something they can choose.

Let's circle back to the main idea of this section: objective truth vs. subjective truth. Once we understand that subjective truth is a self-refuting concept/statement then it is difficult to proceed with a worldview that values subjective truth over objective truth. However, I do not think many people really think through the consequences. They just hear the common sayings, "my truth and your truth", or "you do you" and think that sounds pretty congenial. They don't want to jump ship from "your truth/my truth" because they don't want to be ostracized, called a bigot, or lose friends and family. And I get it, it can be scary, but the consequences of subjective truth taking priority are spiraling out of control and I don't know how much further we can go. And again, not to mention, subjective truth isn't even a logical statement.

Theme 5: Intersectionality

I first learned of the term intersectionality from podcast host and author, Allie Stuckey (2020). Her podcast was my first introduction to critical theory and intersectionality. Intersectionality is the idea that multiple axes of privilege and oppression exist (Campell & Manning, 2018). It is a tool that "gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves" (Collins, 2020, p. 2). Allie Stuckey (2020) explains intersectionality as a point system that assigns points to a person based on their descriptors that are considered oppressed. Whoever has the most oppression points is regarded as the person with the most valuable insight on a topic related to their oppression. Noah Rothman (2019) explains,

> "Practically, "privilege" is enjoyed by those with one or more of the following traits: white, wealthy, heterosexual, male. Those who lack at least one of those traits suffer some discrimination, but prejudice is doled out in degrees. A gay white man suffers less prejudice than a black heterosexual woman, to say nothing of a poor, disabled, Native-American lesbian, and so on. This is intersectionality." (p. 14)

If this system is executed, it could lead to a mishandeling of the topic at hand. For example, if I were to participate with local community members in a conversation about racism, using the tool of intersectionality, my insight and opinions would be valued less since I belong to the oppressing group.

Another example arises with the topic of abortion. Men are often undervalued in conversations about abortion and their opinions are disregarded because they are male and are therefore the oppressors. However, men can be positive contributors to discussion on abortion and often have high interest in the topic because of their wives, daughters, sisters, or friends. For example, my husband is a loving, supportive, and respectful husband and father to our daughter. He has a lot of opinions to share about women's rights that come from a place of love, logic, and protection of women.

Intersectionality can be confusing because people belong to many of the descriptor categories that are used to define a person (race, class, gender, ability) and often those descriptors are conflicting in their classification as oppressed or oppressor. For example, I am a woman (oppressed) and heterosexual (oppressor). On the topic of gender-neutral washrooms my opinion should be valued because I am woman and therefore considered oppressed, however a transgender person could have a different opinion to mine and they are also considered oppressed. According to intersectionality we are both oppressed and yet we could have different opinions on gender-neutral washrooms, thus making it difficult to determine whose opinion is considered more valuable on the topic. Rothman (2019) explains how "intersectionality unites those who would be mounting otherwise disparate and disorganized campaigns of resistance against discrimination" and how they are so focused on their allegiance to one another that is forces them to "surrender discretion" (p. 18).

Rather than prioritizing logical and respectful dialogue and debate between all people, intersectionality elevates certain opinions based on the descriptors of the person holding the opinion. It claims to elevate underrepresented voices and social groups and invite all voices to the table. But it elevates certain voices based on their perceived oppression at the cost of silencing other voices (Crenshaw, 1996).

Summary

Chapter four focused on my analysis and reflection of the five points of critical theory, as outlined by Neil Shenvi (2020). I used my understanding of current literature and my personal experience living and working in a remote, Indigenous community to evaluate how a critical theory perspective and a biblical worldview interact. It is my conclusion that as a Christian I cannot believe and honor what God teaches through scripture, creation and special revelation while also holding to a critical theory perspective.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of Project

This autoethnography summarized my personal experience researching, analyzing, and synthesizing information I learned about critical theory and Christianity. The aim of this project was to share with the reader a synthesized description of current literature from critical theorists and share my personal experience interacting with the texts and learning how it interacts with my biblical worldview. The goal of this autoethnography was to encourage others to investigate critical theory and think critically about how it affects their personal worldview and the lives of themselves and their family.

Outstanding questions/issues

Further research on this topic should investigate the positive elements of critical theory and how they can be utilized to truly help vulnerable people while respecting their dignity and individuality. Critical theory does expose the sinful nature of humans and it would be remiss of us if we did not love one another by addressing each other's sins as Christ has called us to do, and work as a church to support our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Research should investigate how the Christian church can support its members and non-members as God has called us to in our current political and cultural climate, while respecting everyone's individual identity in God and not focusing on earthly group identities.

Second, critical theory does expose narratives that are counter to truths taught in the Bible. For example, critical theory challenges the narratives that Hollywood, Wall Street and Big Tech companies are pushing onto our culture. The Bible does not instruct us to oppose ideas solely based on their alliance with perceived oppressive groups, like critical theory does, but the Bible does instruct us to think critically about the ideas of the world in comparison to Biblical truths. Further research should investigate how influential forces (media, Wall Street, etc.) within our culture agree with, or disagree with, Biblical truths and this research should be done on influential forces that are represented by all social groups, not just groups that are represented by what critical theorists deem oppressive groups (Shenvi, 2020).

Third, further research should also include critical analysis of any new literature, both academic and popular non-fiction, that is published on the topic of critical theory or by critical theorists. The field of critical theory is expanding quickly, and authors are continuously responding to America's politics and economics with new social justice movements or revisions of current social justice movements. The field of critical theory is constantly changing and

adapting to meet America's ever-changing landscape and it crucial that Christians stay up to date on the ways critical theorists are affecting change in our culture and society.

Implementation Benefits

The implementation benefits of this research project are both academic and personal for the reader. It is my hope that by describing my personal experience interacting and analyzing critical theory, readers will be encouraged to do their own critical thinking on critical theory.

The literature in this autoethnography provides the reader with a base to begin their own research. Readers should use the reference list below to locate critical theorists and investigate other pieces of literature they have published. The reference section of any of the references below also provide a wealth of resources for the reader to research.

The description in chapter four of my analysis of critical theory provides the reader with an example of how they could critically engage with critical theory and compare it to their own worldview. It is my hope readers will be inspired to not blindly consume ideas from our culture and society, but that they will think critically with confidence and hope.

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