Harmful, Helpful, or Both? A Commentary on Postmodernism and Critical Theories

in Community Development Education

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Abstract

In this relatively informal commentary, I discuss both the potentially helpful and harmful roles that postmodernism and critical theories (e.g., critical race theory, critical sexuality theory) have in academia in general and particularly in community development scholarship and pedagogy. After introducing postmodernism and critical theories as well as some of the common criticisms of these frameworks, I discuss the importance of cultural capital in community development and the ways that postmodernism and critical theories can both protect and maintain cultural capital as well as damage and diminish it. I also discuss the importance of ensuring that students in community development courses understand these frameworks and understand that they are but some of the theories and skills students will need to know to be effective and ethical community development scholars and practitioners. The duty of educators is to ensure that students have the abilities and support to do the hard work of critically evaluating and analyzing all viable approaches to community development work.

Keywords: critical theories, postmodernism, pedagogy, cultural capital, cultural imperialism

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As in all fields of education and training, incorporating multiple perspectives, philosophies, pedagogies and epistemologies – both applied and theoretical – into classrooms focusing on community development is vital (Hains et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2018; Stanard & Rios, 2021; Westoby & Dowling, 2013). By assuring students have multiple perspectives when learning about community development theory and practice, educators are providing their students with the tools and skills necessary to be personally successful as well as ensuring the well-being of the communities with whom they work.

The importance of students successfully engaging in impactful community development while understanding and incorporating multiple perspectives is vital for those students who will be practitioners and scholars of community development in communities other than their own. People, professionals or otherwise, who engage in community development work without a clear understanding of the perspectives, desires, and goals of the receiving community run the risk of doing more harm than good. As my colleagues and I have argued elsewhere (Ashdown & Buck, 2018; Ashdown et al., 2021), community development work that is planned and executed by community outsiders often imperils, and sometimes destroys, the cultural capital of the community. In fact, we claim that community development work managed or controlled by community outsiders, without clear and meaningful oversight by local community members, is a form of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism.

Of the multiple possible perspectives students should be introduced to are the approaches of postmodernism and related critical theories (Grenz, 1996). These theoretical perspectives, common in many social science classrooms and in much current scholarship, have recently been

strongly criticized by academics (e.g., Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020) and U.S. politicians alike (Keierleber, 2021). While some of these criticisms have been anti-intellectual and based on fear mongering and identity-based prejudice (Wallace-Wells, 2021), some of the critiques are worthy of consideration. To be clear, none of these criticisms should result in critical theories being banned from classrooms, which would be a clear example of censorship and violation of academic freedom (Cineas, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021).

Efforts to censor educators' ability to teach about critical race theory is already experiencing concept creep (Haslam, 2016). Various conservative groups are using bans on critical race theory to report objections to school lessons and materials on Galileo, Greek mythology, and LGBTQ+ issues (Greene, 2021), highlighting the need to protect academic freedom. While I do not, as other have, argue that critical theories (and particularly critical race theory) or postmodernism are examples of 'reverse racism' or are damaging students who learn about them (Keierleber, 2021; Wallace-Wells, 2021), I do contend that for some scholars and educators, these theoretical perspectives have become so dominant in their work that their students are no longer being exposed to other valuable perspectives that will benefit future generations of community development professionals (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020).

As has been pointed out by others (e.g., Hanlon, 2021; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020), critical theories and postmodernism have become prevailing features of the current 'culture wars' in the U.S. and Western Europe; academics, public intellectuals, journalists, and celebrities who do not adopt the perspectives of these theories run the risk of being 'canceled' (McWhorter, 2020b; Narizny, n.d.). Because of this, scholarship and pedagogy that touch on topics relevant to postmodernism and critical theories run the risk of being politicized, as many people (including many scholars and educators) have the goal of supporting or perpetuating a preferred narrative

rather than an agnostic and critical evaluation of multiple possibly valid perspectives (Martin, 2016). Adhering to an agreed-upon account of how the world works (e.g., postmodernism, critical theories) – whether or not that account is the best supported or most applicable – increases the likelihood that community development practitioners and scholars will engage in the type of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism that these theoretical frameworks so strongly claim to refute.

Because postmodernism and critical theories are so often relied upon (and perhaps overused, resulting in the inappropriate ignorance of other viable theories and perspectives) in academia, discussions about these frameworks have become commonplace in the media, politics, and activist circles. While these frameworks should be a part of relevant conversations, classes, and movements, it is important that scholars and educators use care when incorporating postmodernism and critical theories into community development education. My argument can (and should) be made about all theories and frameworks scholars might use in relevant work, but my focus here is on the approaches of postmodernism and critical theories because of the attention and focus they have received recently on campuses and from news media (Keierleber, 2021).

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is an academic movement stemming from the mid-20th century, seen by some as a reaction to modernism and often criticized as obscurantism, or the practice of making things purposefully difficult to understand (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Originally rooted in art and architecture as a response to some people's dislike of modernism in those fields, the basic tenets of postmodernism have been applied widely, including to literature, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, music, political science, criminology, feminism and more. This makes

postmodernism less a specific academic theory or approach and more a list of 'stuff' that can be applied to nearly any academic pursuit.

The hallmarks or 'stuff' of postmodernism include a rejection of absolute truth and knowledge, and the argument that knowledge is socially created by groups and people in power to (consciously or otherwise) maintain existing hierarchies for the benefit of the privileged. Postmodernist thinkers would argue that truth and knowledge is flexible, based on the experiences of individual people and created via malleable discourse. Rather than modernist claims regarding the importance of objective truth via the path of science and evidence, postmodernists question the ideas of science, objective morality, truth or language and instead focus on rejecting what are referred to as grand narratives and ideologies.

For example, within my own primary discipline, psychology, postmodern psychologists argue that there is no way to gain an objective understanding of what it means to be human or of what it means for any individual to be living within and experiencing the world (see Holzman, 1999 and Holzman & Morss, 2000, for more about postmodern psychologies). Instead, a postmodern psychologist might argue that a person's life and experiences should be accepted without question as that person's own truth and any attempt to apply scientific rigor, statistics, or objectivity to understand that person is simply an attempt to reify structures of power.

Criticisms of postmodernism are easy to find, including accusations of pseudoscience, obscurantism, and purposeful vagueness (Chomsky, n.d.; Dawkins, 1998; Hitchens, 2003). It has even been referred to as mumbo-jumbo in Wheelen's (2012) book about 'modern delusions' and was effectively (and humorously) skewered as part of the Sokol affair (Sokal, 1996) and a similar scheme described in Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020). Postmodernists' rejection of objective truth, science and empirical evidence are troubling to say the least – their tendency to

also discuss issues of major importance (e.g., racism, morality, poverty, etc.) in purposefully vague or confusing terms is even more concerning. As Hitchens (2003) and others have argued, ideas should be shared in the clearest and simplest way possible; otherwise, it leaves everyone suspicious about how much the speaker really understands what they are saying.

To be fair, as with most theories, it is probably obvious that postmodernism has aspects and characteristics that seem to make good sense. Psychologists and practitioners of community development should realize that people are individuals, and individuals' understandings, desires, beliefs and experiences cannot (and should not) simply be reduced to statistics and data that is then applied uncritically to develop generalizations about all people. Community work that is conducted in such a way is oppressive and, if the practitioner is not a member of the community, it would be a perfect example of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism.

On the other hand, if educators and practitioners are unwilling to use data and science appropriately to make relevant and ethical generalizations about communities, imagine the waste of resources and time required to reinvent the wheel (so to speak) each time a practitioner or scholar begins to work with a community. I concede that there may never be a point where community development scholars and practitioners are able to discover a universal, objective way to understand the experiences of communities and people in such a way that leads to universal solutions; yet refusing to use the tools of science, data and statistics based on previous work to help understand communities and people would be foolish. Throwing the baby out with the bathwater comes to mind.

Critical Theories

Critical Theory argues that social problems come from cultural beliefs and social structures (Bohman et al., 2019). Originally used in social philosophy and sociology, critical

theories have received their own postmodern twist (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Most often

applied to cultural and identity studies (e.g., race, sexuality, gender, etc.), postmodern critical

theories argue that society's problems are systemic and must be understood via historical,

cultural and contextual lenses. At the same time, because according to postmodernist thinking

truth and facts are subjective and unreliable, applying postmodern critical theories to solve

systemic problems is impossible. In other words, what a person or community experiences based

on their own subjective truths cannot be applied to address system-wide problems. Hence, the

system-wide problems continue to impact local communities and individuals, but the problems

cannot be meaningfully addressed because the local communities' and individuals' do not hold

any universal or objective truths that could be applied outside that particular community or

person. Chicken or egg? You see the problem here.

Recently in the USA, some specific critical theories have been getting a lot of political

and media attention. Critical race theory, which argues that racism is not only a problem of

individual people behaving in racist ways but is a systemic, society-wide issue (Sawchuk, 2021),

has been used by some political parties to whip up their supporters, create faux-rage, and score

political points. More specifically, this has included local politicians, school boards, state

legislatures and governors finding ways to ban discussions of critical race theory in public

classrooms (Dorman, 2021). Much of this debate seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding of

what critical race theory is. As one recent headline put it, "parents want kids to learn about

ongoing effects of slavery - but not critical race theory. They're the same thing" (Richards &

Wong, 2021).

Similar debates could (and likely will) occur around other specific types of critical

theories. For example, critical sexuality theory (sometimes also called critical queer theory or

critical gender and sexuality theory) applies similar thinking to issues around sexual (and sometimes gender) identities that critical race theory does to issues of racial and ethnic identity (Beasly, 2005). That is, how do system-wide structures and cultural assumptions play a role in the way that people of minority sexualities are discriminated against and oppressed? Criticism regarding critical theories is less about the academic arguments the theories make. Who, after just a little bit of research and thinking, could truly argue that racism, sexism or homophobia are not deeply-ingrained characteristics of nearly all societies and cultures? Instead, the critiques address issues similar to critiques of postmodernism: the language used by these theorists is too vague (deBoer, 2021) and it leads to scholarship that is more concerned with making political points than creating knowledge (Martin, 2016).

On one hand, some have argued that an uncritical, de-contextualized application of critical race theory (and, by extension, other types of critical theories) leads to self-victimization, a victimology mindset (Loury, 2021; McWhorter, 2001) and provides absolution for those (such as elected politicians) who could make meaningful systemic change (Reed, 2020). The uncritical utilization and application of critical race theory has led, in some estimations, to the rise of non-empirical, non-scientific and condescending approaches to reduce racism, such as anti-racism (Church, 2020; Hughes, 2019; Kendi, 2019) and white fragility (Church, 2018; DiAngelo, 2018; McWhorter, 2020a).

While such frameworks may have value when utilized on a personal, individual level, scholars and educators must be willing to explain to their students (and perhaps to their colleagues) that care is required when attempting to use such interventions beyond their current reliable and valid contexts. Until more empirical evidence supports the use of such interventions in a large-scale, community-based way, community development professionals should be wary

of utilizing them in that way. Alternatively, the wide-spread use of non-empirical interventions and programs can be used as a powerful teaching aid for the importance of empiricism in community development as well as provide fruitful avenues for scholars and students who might want to explore the empirical support for such programs.

Like postmodernism in general, critical theories offer important issues for scholars and practitioners of community development to consider in their work. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and other similar problems certainly are systemic in nature, and focusing only on the individual racist behavior of some people is not going to fix those problems. Approaching community development with a mind toward the local aspects of the community and the people who live there is vital, and what worked in one place might not work somewhere else, requiring us to be careful about overgeneralizing and over-universalizing problems and solutions. What remains, then, is a challenge for educators and scholars to make sure they are supporting students' learning about how to balance the application and criticisms of postmodernism and critical theories alongside the benefits and criticisms of other approaches to community development. One helpful way to do this is by utilizing the community capitals framework.

Cultural Capital

The community capitals framework describes various types of capital that interact within a community (Emery & Flora, 2006; Guiterrez-Montes et al., 2009; Pigg et al., 2013). This framework has been utilized and expanded upon in different domains (e.g., human capital). Human capital includes aspects within a community such as cultural and social capitals. Social capital has received quite a bit of attention in past community development work (Dale & Newman, 2010; Zou et al., 2018) while the impact of cultural capital in community development

practice and scholarship is often lacking (Ashdown et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020; Talmage et al., under review).

Cultural capital plays a necessary role in the well-being of any community and should always be a consideration for community development scholars and practitioners (Ashdown et al., 2020; Talmage et al., under review). In the past, I have written about my definition of cultural capital (Ashdown et al., 2020): it is a resource (or set of resources) that a community shares that explains and manifests their traditions, values, and perspectives. This might include things such as art, food, music, and language. These are items and beliefs that members of a community or society use to create and maintain their cultures, systems, societies, well-being and livelihoods.

As scholars, practitioners, and especially educators of community development, teaching students the importance of preserving and supporting cultural capital should be (Ashdown et al., 2020). Community development professionals and their students should do everything possible to ensure that cultural capital receives the protection and respect it deserves because it is so important to the well-being, health, and harmony of the receiving communities (Panelli & Tipa, 2007; Talmage et al., under review; Wiseman & Brasher, 2008). Community development professionals are obligated to teach their students that anything they might do, intentionally or unintentionally, that damages or diminishes the cultural capital of a community is unethical and likely immoral and must be avoided.

In some past work with my colleagues (Ashdown & Buck, 208; Ashdown et al., 2020; Miller & Ashdown, 2020; Talmage et al., under review), we have argued that community development work that ignores the cultural capital of a community or worse, damages or destroys that cultural capital, is neo-colonialist and culturally imperialistic in nature. To assume

that practitioners, scholars or educators of community development know more about what a

particular community needs than the members of that community is not only ridiculous but

perhaps the peak of bad scholarship and practice.

At this point in my argument, it might not be clear how I can be trying to make the point

that an overutilization of postmodernism and critical theories (which argue that scholars and

practitioners must pay close attention to the lived experiences of people the people they work

with) is antithetical to community development work and education that protects the cultural

capital and well-being of communities. I can explain.

How Postmodernism and Critical Theories Can Be Helpful in Community Development

As I have hopefully made clear, postmodernism and critical theories, while problematic

in some ways, also offer important points of consideration to ensure the maintenance and

protection of cultural capital in community development. For example, recognizing that

oppression, bias, and discrimination exist in structures and systems rather than only in the

individual behaviors of some people is vital to creating societies and communities that are safer,

less oppressive, and more just.

Postmodernism and critical theories also lead to considerations about the ways that

people's individual experiences may not always closely relate to what previous science and data

suggest. Even in situations that are similar to earlier development work someone has done, they

must take care (and teach students to take care) not to inappropriately universalize or

overgeneralize previous scholarship and practice. Communities are made up of individuals, and

individuals have unique beliefs and experiences. Recognizing that, and considering how

postmodernist thinking and critical theories might play a relevant role in community

development work will create better scholars, practitioners, and educators. As I somewhat

tongue-in-cheek claimed above, postmodernists and critical theorists are in danger of throwing

out the baby with the bathwater by rejecting science; community development educators and

scholars must be wary of doing the same thing if they mistakenly reject all aspects of these

frameworks without careful consideration. Postmodernism and critical theories can be used

effectively in classrooms and in applied work, but care is required in the way this is done.

How Postmodernism and Critical Theories Can Be Harmful in Community Development

While it is clear that postmodernism and critical theories have a role to play in

community development, there are also some aspects of the frameworks that should cause pause

and lead to serious consideration. Perhaps most concerning is the rejection of objective truth and

science. Scientific data and conclusions have often been misused by people seeking justification

for their behavior or beliefs (Weigman, 2001), making it understandable that many people

distrust scientists and science; however, the solution to this is to improve science, science

communication and science ethics – not to reject the understanding and truths about our world

that science can reveal. In other words, science can be used for ethnocentric, racist, sexist, and

homophobic means, but is not in and of itself racist, sexist, or homophobic. Data is data, and

scholars should not reject what they might be able to learn from good data. Instead, their concern

should be for how that data is used and by whom it is used.

As postmodernism and critical theories have gained more use and acceptance in many

different fields of academia, as well as on the streets by activists and journalists, educators must

avoid the danger of a culture of conformity or compliance in their classrooms. Students are

hearing about these frameworks often – and in some classes, these frameworks are likely

provided to students as the only acceptable way to engage in critical thought, scientific inquiry,

or logical reasoning. As others have warned (Loury, 2021; McWhorter, 2020b), an overuse and

dependence on postmodernism and critical theories has led to a concerning increase in cancel culture and a fear of academics and students alike to question these theories (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Remember that the basis of a liberal education (and thus, the foundation of the important work of educators and scholars) is to ensure students have the skills and support to engage in free and critical thought, regardless of the current political support for or against specific theories.

Conclusion

Educators of future community development scholars and practitioners should ensure that students have the tools necessary to be intellectually honest and rigorous, willing and able to apply more than one framework or theory to their work. No scholar or educator should provide students with only one framework or theory with which to consider the work of community development. That is true of the community capitals framework that I discussed above, and it is true of perspectives based on postmodernism and critical theories. Instead, educators must do the hard work of helping students do the hard work of critically evaluating and reasoning their way through the advantages and disadvantages of all viable approaches.

The perspective of community members can and should be utilized in community development. In fact, I argue that community members should have veto power in community development plans, because it is their own community, cultural capital, and well-being on the line. But this does not mean that science, evidence, data and best practices should be ignored. Engaging in this kind of balanced work (and doing it successfully) is difficult and teaching students to do the same is even harder. But we owe it to them and to the communities they will work with to make sure we do it.

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