Teach Me How to Love: The Love Ethic as a Foundation for Liberatory Counseling Education

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TEACH ME HOW TO LOVE

The widespread assumption that ethical behavior takes the fun out of life is false. In actuality, living ethically ensures that relationships in our lives, including encounters with strangers, nurture our spiritual growth. — bell hooks, *All About Love*

The most common purpose of higher education is to develop knowledge, enhance curiosity, and cultivate critical thinking skills to position individuals to advance the needs of society. Higher education has a responsibility to teach one how to live ethically, grow spiritually, and ultimately, to love. Feminist activist scholar bell hooks, in her renowned text, All About Love, theorizes love as an essential pathway to justice, noting that love does not exist without justice (hooks, 2000). Nearly twenty-five years after the introduction of this text, hooks' mission to love, not as in romantic love, but social justice activism and community care, is more poignant and necessary than ever before. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted existing health and educational inequities in the United States, undergraduate students can benefit from learning about the social, economic, and political factors that perpetuate injustice, fostering a passion for collective social change.

Higher education institutions, such as colleges and universities, have a significant opportunity to influence the rising generation of students to drive change by creating and sustaining social justice initiatives. Social justice is defined as a set of beliefs and actions that acknowledge the oppression of marginalized groups with a goal to eliminate resulting inequities (Vance-Chalcraft et al., 2024). With this mission in mind, disciplines preparing students to work in healthcare and education settings should be concerned with embedding social justice within the curriculum, teaching practices, and experiential learning opportunities. This article aims to present practical strategies for enhancing counseling education in Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences (SLHS) by incorporating interdisciplinary, social justice-focused learning with

an emphasis on bell hooks' love ethic and cultural humility. Strategies can be applied to undergraduate education in a variety of health and education disciplines and/or helping professions.

Social Position

I am a Black, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, doctoral level educated woman, a descendent of enslaved African people, and professor in Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences. As an alumna of Spelman College, I had the privilege of a decolonized undergraduate education, that centered my own affirmation and liberation as a woman of the African diaspora, with nurturing instructors who not only looked like me but cared deeply for my well-being and personal growth. This experience undoubtedly shapes by pedagogical orientation and beliefs around liberatory teaching.

Social Justice and Counseling Education

The heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want to be. — bell hooks, *All About Love*

The link between education and truth-telling is evident in that education should promote critical thinking, questioning knowledge and pathways to knowledge, through critical reflection and engagement in the classroom space. In today's media, truth-telling in education is not only frowned upon, but banned across the United States. Dog-whistle politics and the presence of anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the education system, where racism is still very much present, seeks to imagine a colorblind environment, where discussion of racism, privilege, and other biases are not only actively discouraged, but entirely repressed (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2024). Truth-telling is essential for societal change and progress, as we cannot change what we

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do not first accept and acknowledge, both historically and in the present reality. Social justice education is an example of critical pedagogy that empowers students to think critically and to engage in social change (Jacobs & Morton, 2024). Critical pedagogy can be a beneficial approach to teaching social-justice centered counseling and can be applied to all helping professions.

The field of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences (SLHS) sits at the crossroads of the healthcare and educational systems. Truth-telling about healthcare and education systems involves an acknowledgement of pervasive educational inequity, medical apartheid, socio-economic disparities, and racism as a public health crisis. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, 2004) notes the outcomes of counseling for the profession of speech-language pathology (SLP) to include increased understanding and acceptance of communication disorders, enhanced psychosocial well-being and quality of life, as well as improved understanding around reducing barriers. Well-being and social justice are deeply interconnected because individuals need equity to thrive in society. Furthermore, the goal of social justice is to dismantle systemic inequity in all forms, from discrimination and bias, to a lack of access to opportunities and resources, which undoubtedly impacts one's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Research on counseling practices related to instruction, content, and curriculum is lacking (Doud, 2020). There is an urgent need for liberative, social-justice-oriented counseling education in SLHS. This paper seeks to address this gap by providing guidance around social justice counseling education and interdisciplinary learning through critical, inclusive pedagogy.

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Strategies For Social Justice Centered Counseling

Love is an action, a participatory emotion. Whether we are engaged in a process of self-love or of loving others we must move beyond the realm of feeling to actualize love. — bell hooks, *All About Love*

I taught a flexible-synchronous course to upper-level undergraduate students as an elective in the Communication Sciences and Disorders department at a predominantly White Midwestern, public university. By centering social justice and using an interdisciplinary lens, the aim of the course was for students to develop knowledge and skills around major counseling tenants and techniques as well as interrogate interpersonal and systemic barriers for building partnerships with clients. The course learning objectives were as follows:

1. Compare and contrast a variety of counseling and their major tenants.

2. Demonstrate developing ability to navigate and discuss difficult areas of counseling, to include trauma-response, suicidal ideation, and difficult prognosis

3. Reflect on the concept of intersectionality and its role in affirming counseling and therapy.

4. Critically self-examine one's own empathy, personality, nonverbal communication, and emotional intelligence.

5. Deconstruct privilege and power in counseling and clinician-client dynamics.

There are many actionable steps for developing a liberatory counseling curriculum using an interdisciplinary focus. It is not enough to infuse justice-centered content when the

instructors' pedagogical stance is colonized, not culturally responsive, or inclusive for all students. Strategies are organized by content and pedagogy.

Content: bell hooks' Love Ethic

Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic. — bell hooks, *All About Love*

My course included a book club where students read All About Love by bell hooks and demonstrated their learning through reflections on the discussion board. hooks (2000) conceptualizes a transformative commitment to a "love ethic," that is necessary for societal change and the dismantling of oppression in all forms, which ultimately impacts well-being and quality of life. A love ethic embodies all dimensions of love, from respect and responsibility to trust and care (hooks, 2020). Moving from the medical model of disability to the social/political model of disability, explicit teaching around the social, cultural, and political "humanistic" aspects speech-language pathology, such as human diversity, belonging, and justice, is needed to counsel clients with communication disorders. With this learning activity, students were exposed to a historically marginalized perspective and disciplinary thought outside of SLHS.

Content: Cultural humility as the Theoretical Foundation for Liberatory Counseling

To integrate social justice into counseling education, students need to become committed to an orientation of continued learning, reflection, and confronting potential systemic barriers for their clients. Cultural humility, recognized as a key practice for SLPs, aligns effectively with social justice education. Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) define cultural humility as a lifelong commitment to learning and self-evaluation, to shifting power dynamics, developing mutually beneficial advocacy partnerships, and institutional accountability. Many components of

hooks' love ethic reflect the orientation of cultural humility, which is necessary for facilitating therapeutic relationships, and cultural humility is rooted in counseling education (Hook et al., 2013; Hook et al., 2017). The framework of cultural humility was centered throughout the course. Students were required to apply cultural humility to complete two roleplay activities, one around counseling techniques and one around major counseling theories.

Content: Social Justice Topics and Practical Learning Activities

It was my intention to decolonize the traditional CSD counseling curriculum by exposing students to a variety of contemporary topics, historically marginalized voices, and experiences of clients oppressed by systemic racism, heterosexism, ableism, and mental health injustice. The process of decolonizing the curriculum challenges Western epistemology, or ways of knowing and exploration, providing an inclusive opportunity for joint knowledge production, intellectual inquiry, and recognizing how power systems create knowledge in an oppressive way (Omodan, et al., 2023). The following interdisciplinary content areas/topics were addressed in the course: Mental & Emotional Health Justice, Racial Trauma, Power & Privilege, Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Healing, LGBTQIA + Affirming Counseling, and Disability Humility, Students were also provided course credit for attending social justice-centered campus and community events, hosted by the university's diversity institute and division of Multicultural Affairs.

Pedagogy: Inclusive Teaching and Anti-Racism

When we work with love we renew the spirit; that renewal is an act of self-love, it nurtures our growth. It's not what you do but how you do it .— bell hooks, *All About Love*

In conceptualizing a pathway for centering social justice in counseling education, it is imperative to begin with a premise that *how* one teaches (pedagogy) is even more important *what*

(content) one teaches. Inclusive pedagogy provides a model for students to experience social justice in action in the classroom. I utilized the following inclusive teaching strategies (Sathy & Hogan, 2022):

- *Syllabus:* Warm syllabus language, including my personal commitment to anti-racist pedagogy, cultural humility framework, inclusive language policy, and self-care clause

- *Learning Activities & Assessments:* Providing students with highly structured learning assessments, utilizing grading rubrics to enhance transparency, utilizing frequent, formative assessments, and providing qualitative feedback

- *Community and Collaboration:* Fostering a community of collaboration with opportunities to work in small groups during and outside of class, attending campus events with peers, and a celebratory *All About Love* themed brunch

- *Climate:* Reducing the sense of urgency and honoring diversity within lived experiences with flexible due dates for assignments and "slow start" groundings for class meetings, centering mindfulness, self-care, and gratitude

- *Authentic Instruction:* I engaged in self-disclosure around my use of counseling techniques in clinical practice and shared my personal experiences often.

Conclusion

"If we were constantly remembering that love is as love does, we would not use the word in a manner that devalues and degrades its meaning." — bell hooks, *All About Love*

Counseling education for SLPs could enhance social justice efforts by improving understanding of the distinctive societal barriers affecting the outcomes of clients (Unger et al.,

2021). This paper offers an interdisciplinary approach to liberatory counseling education. The upper-level undergraduate course emphasized the essentiality of hooks' (2000) love ethic as an aspect of social justice action, and cultural humility as a key orientation for connection and building strong therapeutic relationships with clients. Previous research on the influence of cultural humility on the counseling relationship found that increased cultural humility was associated with more positive working alliance ratings (Hook et al., 2013; Hook et al., 2017). With a clear commitment to the voices of communities on the margins, liberatory psychology orients toward empowerment and interrogating the relationship between liberation and oppression, and cultural humility facilitates this work (Abe, 2020). Social justice-centered counseling education that centers cultural humility is needed to prepare future SLPs and helping professionals to engage in mutually beneficial partnerships with clients and families.

About the Author

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