Critical Race Theory: helpful or harmful?

"What really frightens and dismays us is not external events themselves but the way in which we think about them".
Epictetus

Imagine, while out walking, you see a friend across the road. You wave but she doesn't wave back. She passes by, ignoring you completely. What would go through your mind? "What have I done to offend her?" "How dare she ignore me!" What would you feel? Angry, sad? What would you do? Dwell on what happened until you felt thoroughly miserable, or call your friend to find out what was wrong? Suppose you discovered she had just been diagnosed with a serious illness. How would you feel then? Would it change your view of what had happened?

This scenario introduces people to Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. It demonstrates how the same event can be interpreted in different ways and encourages people to consider how best to respond, rather than jump to the wrong conclusions or react purely on the basis of their feelings.

But what happens if someone is encouraged to do the opposite? Suppose, for example, they are taught to look for evidence of racism everywhere and to interpret all encounters as potential 'microaggressions'? Over time, through a process of confirmation bias, they will indeed learn to 'see' racism everywhere, becoming increasingly angry and resentful, viewing themselves as a victim, others as prejudiced and the world as hostile. Their belief that racism is everywhere becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Critical Race Theory encourages people to adopt this way of thinking. It underpins books such as *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo. However, Gregg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt refer to these negative thinking styles as 'reverse cognitive behaviour therapy', pointing out that they are associated with depression and anxiety.

Aaron Beck, one of the founders of CBT, describes them as 'cognitive distortions' which lead people to perceive reality in a biased and inaccurate way.

Here are some examples of the cognitive distortions that can be found in Critical Race Theory:

Emotional Reasoning and Catastrophising

"You've made me feel bad, so you are a racist"

"I am traumatised by your words"

Critical Race Theory rejects the idea of objective reality and teaches that only subjective experience can be trusted to tell the 'truth'. Yet, as we saw from the 'walking down the street' example, you cannot always trust your feelings to tell you what is actually happening.

Believing you will be 'traumatised' by words is an example of 'catastrophising' – overestimating the likelihood that something awful will happen and underestimating your ability to cope.

Rather than get caught in a spiral of threat-detection and catastrophising, CBT encourages you to pause and ask whether you're over-reacting. Did your friend really mean to hurt you with their words? Can you give them the benefit of the doubt on this occasion? Learn how to cope with your feelings and develop resilience rather than allowing yourself to feel overwhelmed.

All or Nothing Thinking and Labelling/Blaming

"I am a victim and you oppress me"

"You are a white supremacist"

'All or Nothing' thinking cultivates a 'them-and-us' view of the world that fosters division. Being labelled a 'white supremacist' and blamed for something, simply on the basis of your skin colour, leads to anger and resentment or shame and guilt. People from ethnic minorities who disagree with anti-racist ideas promoted by Critical Race Theory, are cruelly labelled 'coconuts' or other derogatory names.

CBT suggests that you learn to take a wider overview of what is happening around you. Look for the 'shades of grey', and alternative perspectives. Flexibility of thought is an important skill to develop as it helps human beings adapt. Rather than lash out at others, consider how it would feel if you or someone you loved was unfairly labelled or blamed.

Overgeneralisation and Discounting Positives

"All white people are racists"

"The UK is a racist country"

These statements make the assumption that millions of people hold exactly the same opinions and prejudices, based on the colour of their skin. This is quite an assumption to make without any evidence to support it. Human beings are complex. Does it make sense to assume people hold certain views simply on the basis of their skin colour? Is it right that your ethnicity or skin colour determine what you think?

Don't discount the positives. Look for objective evidence of progress made in society to overcome racism. What do British Attitude Surveys indicate about racial prejudice? Is it growing or declining?

Critical Race Theory does not provide the best tools to tackle racism. Blaming others, rather than taking responsibility for your actions, leads to a culture of victimhood and division. Always trusting your feelings to tell you what is 'true' produces mental health problems. But, if you can develop a resilient attitude towards the world, rather than constantly looking for evidence of hostility and prejudice, you will do well. If you can be charitable and forgiving rather than accusatory and angry, social cohesion will follow. If you are flexible in your thinking and open to alternative perspectives, you will flourish.

In the words of Paul Gilbert, "Be helpful not harmful".

Dr Carole Sherwood, Psychologist

Further Reading:
‘The Coddling of the American Mind’, Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt
‘Cynical Theories’, Helen Pluckrose & James Lindsay
‘The Compassionate Mind’, Paul Gilbert