Critical Race Theory and Education

Critical race theory (often referred to by its acronym CRT) emerged during the early 1980s as scholars of color in legal studies began to examine the intransigence of racism within the landscape of the United States following the civil rights movement and the role of the law in maintaining unequal race relations. CRT serves as a counter to discussions that focus on diversity without specifically examining race and power. This entry briefly describes the origins of critical race theory, its central tenets, its major branches, and examples of research in education.

Origins

Critical race theory grew out of critical legal studies, a field that critiques how law in capitalist societies is used to maintain unjust power relations while masking injustices. A small group of legal scholars (mainly but not exclusively African American), including Derrick Bell, Lani Guinier, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, began to ask why the promise of the civil rights movement had stalled, why critical legal studies had so little to say about race as a fundamental form of oppression, and how law is used to subvert racial justice. The 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which had upheld the constitutionality of racially segregated public facilities. The *Brown* decision established the principles that racially separate schools are inherently unequal, and that education is a right that must be made available on equal terms. Despite this decision, however, racist practices persisted in fundamental institutions such as education, housing, banking, and employment.

In this context, legal scholars began to examine how racism is perpetuated, despite legal remedies to address it and despite a national rhetoric of racial progress. In the 1990s, CRT was taken up by scholars in other fields such as education. The work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate is usually cited as marking the entry of CRT into the field of education. Although CRT was developed and has been used mainly in the United States, David Gillborn's work in the United Kingdom has established it elsewhere.

Tenets of Critical Race Theory

The main goal of critical race theorists is to expose hidden systemic and customary ways in which racism works by drawing from a wide variety of sources of knowledge that range from statistics to social science research to personal experience. Critical race theorists have elaborated on the following central tenets, with some variation among theorists in exactly how these are broken out.

Centrality of Racism

Critical race theorists assume that racism is not an aberration, but rather a fundamental, endemic, and normalized way of organizing society. Beginning with the appropriation of indigenous lands and building the economy on a system of slavery, White people created race and racism for their own benefit. Although racism is linked with and contributes to other forms of oppression (such as gender, class, or immigration status), critical race theorists center race when analyzing linked forms of oppression.
The forms that racism take today have shifted from those of the past, but it continues to be evident in the disproportionate access that Whites have to resources such as jobs, wealth, housing, and education, and in the dominant Eurocentric worldview that is used to explain inequalities. White people, generally believing that racism is a thing of the past, tend not to notice racial disparities, and when they do, attribute them to something other than the workings of racism. People of color, based on everyday experience, have a much clearer picture of how racism works, although they may be taught by Whites to distrust their own understandings. By assuming that racism is endemic to society rather than an aberration, CRT asks how it is structured and why it persists, even when it has been purportedly ameliorated.

**Challenges to Claims of Neutrality, Color Blindness, and Meritocracy**

The law is commonly understood as impartial and neutral, applied to all individuals equally without regard to race or other demographic identities. Within a system of competitive individualism, people experience widely different levels of success. The dominant ideology attributes individual disparities to talent and effort, and racial disparities to those factors plus lingering effects of historical racism. CRT challenges the idea that laws and institutions are racially neutral, holding that claims of neutrality and color blindness mask White privileges and power.

Cheryl Harris's theory of Whiteness as property elaborates on this tenet. According to Harris, both slavery and seizure of Indian land established and protected an interest in Whiteness itself. Indian land was sold cheaply to European immigrants or White Americans; slaves could not own land, and states restricted rights of free Blacks to own property or work in certain jobs. Slavery was replaced by legal segregation and racialized restrictions until 1954. Whiteness guaranteed legal entitlement to property and to freedoms that non-Whites did not have. Over time, Whites accumulated property through this overtly racist and legalized system, passing property on to their children. Thus, Whiteness became linked with property and took on legal protections of property rights. On paper, laws may apply equally to everyone, but in practice, Whites use property, power, and customary ways of behaving (such as treating other Whites as competent while questioning the competence of non-Whites) that have the effect of maintaining racism.

**Whites as Beneficiaries of Racial Remedies**

Bell advanced the notion of “interest convergence,” which holds that Whites act on their own self-interest, and advance interests of people of color only as long as they converge with White interests. He based this notion on an analysis of who actually benefited from policies such as school desegregation and affirmative action, finding that even though the policies purported to benefit people of color, Whites used them to benefit White interests. For example, money to support school desegregation disproportionately went to predominantly White schools that received African American transfer students, and White teachers replaced Black teachers to make schools palatable to White parents.

**Centrality of Experiential Knowledge**

The dominant ideology and knowledge system, based on a White worldview—often termed *majoritarian stories*—denies or masks racism. Critical race theorists assume that the people who understand racism best are not its perpetrators, but rather those who are routinely victimized by it. Experiential knowledge that directly names race and racism can be shared in a variety of forms, including stories, interviews, family histories, *testimónios* (testimonies), biographies, and community documents. By sharing personal and community experiences of racism, people of color create counter-stories to the dominant ideology. Redefining and reinterpreting reality from the points of view of people of color serves collective empowerment and knowledge.
Derrick Bell was the first African American law professor on the Harvard Law School Faculty and is widely considered the originator of critical race theory. His books include *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* and *Race, Racism, and American Law*.

Source: David Shankbone, photographer; Wikimedia Commons.

reconstruction, and it challenges racism.

The significance of experiential knowledge has implications for research. Although critical race theorists use a variety of research tools, counter-storytelling has emerged as a central tool. Stories are important because they provide the interpretive frameworks to make sense of experience. Counter-stories explicitly rooted in the experiences of oppressed peoples interpret those experiences in relationship to racism. Many critical race theorists then create composite counter-stories based on interviews or biographies to illustrate how race works in specific contexts, such as in the college classroom.

**Commitment to Working for Social Justice**

Ultimately, critical race theorists are committed to working for social justice. Although some theorists see racism as intractable, most hope that deep analyses of it, coupled with the development of rich counter-stories about how people have worked against racism, will ultimately result in its elimination. For example, Tara Yosso’s concept of “community cultural wealth” examines community resources that university students of color access and use to navigate and succeed within racist educational systems. An understanding of strategies and resources within communities of color refutes deficit-oriented perspectives and points toward productive ways forward.

**Branches of Critical Race Theory**

Much of the initial work in CRT was articulated largely within a Black–White binary. Although scholars of color found the focus on racism immensely helpful, many felt that related concerns such as gender, sexual orientation, language, class, and colonialism were being ignored and that the histories and experiences of diverse communities of color needed to be brought into the conversation. Work that maps critical race theory against other intersecting identities and structures of oppression has led to a “family tree” with related branches.

Latina/o CRT (LatCrit) links an analysis of racism with immigration status, language, culture, and gender. Tribal CRT (TribalCrit) analyzes colonization as a fundamental basis for U.S. society and critiques relationships between the U.S. federal government and indigenous peoples. Colonization is examined in terms of appropriation of land and in terms of how European American thought, knowledge, and power structures continue to dominate and colonize. Asian CRT (AsianCrit) examines racism in past and current nativism and immigration policies and the use of the “model minority” stereotype as a form of racialized control.

Feminist CRT (FemCrit) examines gendered oppression that people of color experience. For example, Crenshaw uses an analysis of the intersection of race and gender to critique the inadequate and sometimes demeaning counseling available to women of color at rape crisis centers, and the general neglect of women of color who are raped or battered. White CRT (WhiteCrit) examines race, racism, and racial identity as it is enacted by Whites, naming and exposing the workings of White privilege.
Critical Race Theory in Education Research

Research in education that is based on critical race theory is of two related kinds: critiques of policies and practices through a CRT lens, and documentation of strategies to navigate and resist racism.

For example, Tyrone Howard studied the underachievement of African American males in PreK–12 schools, and education researchers’ relative silence about this problem. Howard suggests that to develop meaningful interventions, we first must understand the problem as African American males experience and interpret it, and that understanding must allow for discussion of racism. Howard used counter-storytelling as a method as he spent time with 10 young African American men in different schools. He found them to be keenly aware of negative racial stereotypes that were applied to them, and of instances in which race was a significant factor that shaped how teachers and others treated them. He documented many instances of “racial micro-aggressions,” which are subtle but harmful forms of treatment such as put-downs, ignoring Black students' accomplishments, or treating Black students as incompetent. Based on this analysis, Howard suggests implications for testing and disciplinary policies that persistently penalize African American male students.

Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal examined the desire of Chicana/o students to create equitable learning environments. They used LatCrit theory, which they explain extends CRT by developing a pan-Latina/o coalition across differences such as language, skin color, gender, and immigration status. To show active agency in making social change, Solórzano and Delgado Bernal developed a typology of forms of resistance to oppression based on an analysis of interviews with former Chicana/o high school and university students in Los Angeles who had protested the education they were receiving during the 1960s.

—Christine E. Sleeter

Further Readings


Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).


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