

Introduction to Critical Race Theory in Educational Research and Praxis

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Critical race theory (CRT) is an exciting, revolutionary intellectual movement that puts race at the center of critical analysis. Although no set of doctrines or methodologies defines critical race theory, scholars who write within the parameters of this intellectual movement share two very broad commitments. First, as a critical intervention into traditional civil rights scholarship, critical race theory describes the relationship between ostensibly race-neutral ideals, like “the rule of law,” “merit,” and “equal protection,” and the structure of white supremacy and racism. Second, as a race-conscious and quasi-modernist intervention into critical legal scholarship, critical race theory proposes ways to use “the vexed bond between law and racial power” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, 1995, p. xiii) to transform that social structure and to advance the political commitment of racial emancipation.

Critical race theory inherits much from critical legal scholarship and conventional legal principles generated during the civil rights movement, but it also represents a significant departure from these two movements. Like most of critical legal scholarship, critical race theory manifests a deep dissatisfaction with liberal legal ideology generally, and with contemporary civil rights thinking about race and racism in particular. When critical race theory emerged in the late 1980s, national conversations about race and racism were still very much tied to a conventional liberal model of law and society. Under this model, liberal political commitments focused on the universalism, objectivism, and race-neutrality of concepts like “equal opportunity,” “merit,” and “equal protection.” Racism was understood to be a deviation from these race-neutral norms: To be racist was to irrationally assume on the basis of an irrelevant characteristic like skin color that people of color did not possess the universal characteristics of reason or merit. Law was supposed to eradicate these instances of race-

consciousness in social decisionmaking, leaving behind an otherwise race-neutral way of distributing opportunities and resources.

Under this conventional civil rights ideology, community and national leaders condemned segregation in schools because it imposed on education and school life a racial face. Where segregationists tied to race the opportunity and ability to learn, integrationists believed that the ability to learn was universal and race-neutral and the “professional” classroom culture of good education did not take race into account. Indeed, civil rights thinking promoted integration as a way of educating whites to realize that “we are all brothers under the skin.”

Similarly, in terms of workplace discrimination, the civil rights establishment insisted on ostensibly race-neutral, objective standards—that people of color be judged “on their merits” rather than on the color of their skin. As in education, merit represented the universal, impersonal side of distributing opportunities and resources in the workplace; merit standards were purported to measure one’s potential ability without regard to race. In contrast, bias irrationally focused on the irrelevant characteristic of skin color or stereotype. Racism was a failure in reason, which resulted from ignorance, lack of education, or lack of exposure to people of color.

By the early 1980s, the color-blind vision of race relations had exhausted itself, as early critical race theorists have pointed out. Conservatives used the rhetoric of color blindness against affirmative action programs to argue that all race-conscious considerations in education were inconsistent with race-neutrality. The Supreme Court decided that racial disparity in the workplace was not enough to make out a case of discrimination, and that an employer or educational institution could rebut any presumption of discrimination by a minimal showing of workplace or educational necessity for the selection criteria that produced the disparity. Civil rights lawyers lost ground on issues for which they had recently made limited progress, particularly with respect to affirmative action evidentiary rules in antidiscrimination cases.

Beginning with Derrick Bell’s work in the early 1980s, CRT scholars attempted to revive and expand the scope of the reformist commitment to racial emancipation. Critical race theory scholars demonstrated that concepts that the reformists had taken for granted as helpful—color blindness, formal legal equality, merit, integration—in fact reflected, created, and perpetuated institutional racial power. CRT scholars pointed out, for example, that the color-blind perspective represses and renders irrelevant the ways in which race shapes social relationships. In addition, they explained how formal legal equality in fact adopts the perspective of the perpetrator by requiring evidence of conscious racial animus in a discrete discriminatory act, and by ignoring those instances in which racism is built into the structure of social institutions.

In the area of education, for example, critical scholars have pointed out that courts are unwilling to find the need for a desegregation remedy in the absence of some specific and discrete action by an identifiable villain school district. CRT authors noted also how merit standards, which are purported to be race-neutral and objective, are actually race-specific because they were constructed in a context of racial exclusion, by elites who had acquired social power by explicitly excluding people of color.

Critical race theory is a product not only of civil rights thinking but of critical thinking as well. As with civil rights ideology, critical race theory takes many of its starting points from critical legal scholarship, but revises and transforms many of those concepts as well. During the late seventies, critical theory on issues of class had achieved a significant presence in the legal academy in the form of critical legal studies (CLS). The Critical Legal Studies Conference, put together by a collection of neo-Marxists, former New Left and law-and-society types, counterculturalists, and newly emerging critical theorists, represented a predominantly white Left critical intellectual movement organized mostly around issues of class and market forces. CLS scholars demonstrated how ostensibly neutral and apolitical concepts like liberty of contract, consent, and duress were manifestations of a particular institutional political and class-based ideology. Extending and revising Realist insights from the twenties and thirties, CLS scholars methodically exposed the deeply political and contextual character of supposedly apolitical legal standards and free-market rules.

Critical race theorists took their leave from the umbrella movement of critical legal studies in 1989, a year that marked the first official CRT conference devoted exclusively to the issue of race. Many of the early thinkers in critical race theory had developed their ideas as part of the CLS movement. But although critical race theory had inherited much of its critical content from CLS, its ideology diverged in important ways. First, many critical race theorists believed that although critical legal scholars had done much to expose the relationship between law and social power, they had not developed any theory about the relationship between law and racial power. Relatedly, although scholars of color found useful the idea that legal consciousness helps to create social power by persuading victims to participate in their own oppression, some scholars found that this argument ignored the way in which racism and racial power coercively forced oppression on unwilling victims.

In addition, CRT took issue with the CLS critique of legal rights. CLS scholars criticized rights discourse as indeterminate—the legal definition of a right was indeterminate because it depended largely on social context and judicially interpreted meaning. In response, CRT scholars agreed with much of the indeterminacy critique but argued that CLS scholars

had ignored the transformative power of rights for a group of disempowered outsiders. For outsiders who had been denied recognition as full legal persons, the principle of possessing legal rights held great meaning in symbolic if not legally operative ways, even if those legal rights ultimately proved limiting.

Even as critical race theory can be traced to both the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the critical legal studies movement of the late 1970s, contemporary critical race theory has evolved to embrace much from the postmodern cultural revolution in the humanities. Contemporary currents in critical race theory have borrowed most recently from research in postcolonialism, geography and space, ethnicity studies of racial and ethnic identities, critical ethnography, and many other critical movements in the humanities. Just as Critical legal studies produced departure movements in critical race theory and components of radical feminism, critical race theory has produced smaller intellectual movements focusing on Asian American critical scholarship and LatCrit theory—Latina/o critical theory—each of which now sponsors its own conferences.

What can critical race theory, a movement that has its roots in legal scholarship, contribute to research in education? Plenty, as it turns out. Much of the national dialogue on race relations takes place in the context of education—in continuing desegregation and affirmative action battles, in debates about bilingual education programs, and in the controversy surrounding race and ethnicity studies departments at colleges and universities. More centrally, the use of critical race theory offers a way to understand how ostensibly race-neutral structures in education—knowledge, truth, merit, objectivity, and “good education”—are in fact ways of forming and policing the racial boundaries of white supremacy and racism. The chapters by Ladson-Billings; Villenas, Deyhle, and Parker; Pizarro; and other authors in this book provide an excellent example of this use of critical race theory.

To be sure, a number of chapters in this book point out limitations in the use of critical race theory to explore ethnicity, culture, nationality, and language issues related to specific populations (see González and Hidalgo on Mexicana and Latina/o schooling in the United States, and Hermes on tribal nations’ concerns in education). Nevertheless, these chapters demonstrate how schools teach students of color that what they learn in their homes is primitive, mythical, and backward but what they learn in their classrooms is objective, historically accurate, and universal. Students attend class in an atmosphere of “professionalism,” which as the measure of their enlightenment, devalues what they bring to the classroom from their homes and neighborhoods as backward, deprived, and deficient.

Similarly, critical race theory can be used to “deconstruct” the meaning of “educational achievement.” Disparities in the workplace are blamed on the differences in educational achievement between white candidates and applicants of color. However, as the educational research discussed in the chapter by Green demonstrates, tracking procedures (which separate the college-bound students from those who are not “college material”) test for a culturally and racially contingent concept of ability and merit. In a similar vein, as the federal government seeks to wrest control from local communities of color over their neighborhood schools by invoking the notion of “national standards,” education scholars are using critical race theory to demonstrate that these standards may in fact be a form of colonialism, a way of imparting white, Westernized conceptions of enlightened thinking.

In short, the classroom—where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed—is a central site for the construction of social and racial power. Indeed, having understood racial power’s connection to both law and education, critical legal studies and critical race theory scholars have devoted much energy toward challenge and resistance in law schools and the law school classroom.

Critical race theory also provides the theoretical justification for taking seriously oppositional accounts of race—for example, counterstories that challenge the conventional take on integration as a universalizing move to equalize education for all races. Oppositional counterstories provide one way to make good on critical race theory’s commitment to use law to transform and move social institutions toward racial empowerment and emancipation. For many outside the legal field, critical race theory has become synonymous with the idea of counter-storytelling—challenging the stock story on merit or academic tracking or standardized testing by redescribing an experience or a social phenomenon from an outsider’s perspective. Mari Matsuda, one of the founding mothers of critical race theory, exhorts social decision-makers to “look to the bottom” to evaluate the impact of policy on the disenfranchised and disempowered.

This volume takes Matsuda’s call into the field of educational research by integrating the idea of counter-storytelling into the methodology of qualitative research (as demonstrated by its use in Choe’s chapter, for example, and her discussions related to Korean American women and education). Using critical race theory and its intersections with gender and social class analysis as a framework on which to build research, the chapters by Banning and by Tate examine oppositional accounts and narratives in the classroom, the school, and the school district. These sections of the book illustrate how critical race theory’s storytelling can be combined with meticulous qualitative research in the field of education to open exciting new areas of inquiry.

As education scholars begin to integrate the principles of critical race theory into their thinking, they in turn are contributing a great deal to critical race theory, enabling it to look far more systematically at the field of education than legal scholars ever could. This collaboration is a wonderfully exciting sign of the ever growing cross-fertilization in critical scholarship across the academic curriculum. Such multicultural relationships are essential to the achievement of racial liberation.