

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

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Summary

Critical race theory (CRT) is an approach that offers a radical lens through which to make sense of, deconstruct and challenge racial inequality in society. This BERA resource provides an overview of CRT, its emergence and development as a theoretical framework and the key concepts that characterise the approach. The resource will be of interest to those seeking an introductory overview of CRT and especially researchers and students examining issues around race, racial identity and racism.

What is Critical Race Theory?

CRT is a body of scholarship steeped in radical activism that seeks to explore and challenge the prevalence of racial inequality in society. It is based on the understanding that race and racism are the product of social thought and power relations; CRT theorists endeavour to expose the way in which racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable.

Background

The historical context in which CRT emerged is crucial to understanding its development and ambitions as an intellectual and political movement. CRT has its foundations in the 1970s 'leftist legal movement' (Ladson-Billings 1998: 10) Critical Legal Studies (CLS) which saw a small group of academics deconstruct traditional liberal approaches to legal ideology and discourse with a view to better conceptualizing how structural (class) inequalities were perpetuated and maintained in US society (Tate 1997). However, many scholars of color, who had initially identified with the language and goals of CLS (e.g. Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Harris, Patricia Williams), came to the view that it failed to engage usefully with the reality of racism by reductively positioning it as simply analogous to class-based discrimination. Critical Race Theory developed, in part, as a response to the shortcomings of Critical Legal Studies. CRT scholars, involved in the development, describe the process:

Critical Race Theory sought to stage a simultaneous encounter with the exhausted vision of reformist civil rights scholarship (...) and the emergent critique of left legal scholarship (...). [CRT's] engagement with the discourse of civil rights' reform stemmed directly from our lived experience as students and teachers in the nation's law schools. We both saw and suffered the concrete consequences that followed from liberal legal thinkers' failure to address the constrictive role that racial ideology plays in the composition and culture of American institutions... (Crenshaw et al. 1995: xix)

There is no single position statement that defines CRT. The approach continues to undergo revision and refinement in response to the scholarship experiences of CRT theorists and in relation to new developments in legal doctrine and policy discourse (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings 2010). However, CRT scholars do have in common a social constructivist perspective of race and racism and a commitment to understanding - and opposing - the systems that subjugate people of color (Bell 2009).

Central Principles of CRT

There are several themes that are central to Critical Race Theory:

1. Centrality of Racism

CRT begins with a number of basic insights. One is that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society. Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture. (Delgado & Stefancic 2000: xvi)

CRT regards racism as so deeply entrenched in the social order that it is often taken for granted and viewed as natural (Delgado & Stefancic 2001). CRT scholars emphasize that racism does not

necessarily operate in crude explicit forms but operates in a sociopolitical context where it is becoming more embedded and increasingly nuanced. Racism can be evidenced in the outcome of processes and relations irrespective of intent (Gillborn 2005; Ladson-Billings 1998).

2. White Supremacy

Understanding the role and power of White Supremacy in creating and reinforcing racial subordination and maintaining a normalized White privilege is central to the CRT imperative to reveal and oppose racial inequality (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Harris 1995). In this perspective 'White supremacy' does not relate to the obvious crude race hatred of extremist groups but to forces that saturate society as a whole:

[By] 'White supremacy' I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Ansley 1997: 592)

This presents a particular challenge because of the taken-for-granted privileges of Whiteness. White scholars engaging in CRT must strive to be aware of and committed to critically interrogating their own racial privilege and unmasking the invisibility of racism (McIntosh 1997; Picower 2009; Preston 2007; Sleeter 2011).

3. Voices of people of color

CRT places particular importance on the voices and experiences of people of color; their insights into the operation of racism and their understanding of being racially minoritised. It is not assumed that their accounts represent one singular truth or reality rather that their position at the margins of racist society means they will be able to make an especially insightful contribution (Delgado 1989). Such accounts sometimes take the form of story-telling or counter-narrative and may be semi-autobiographical or allegorical in nature. As a tool, story-telling can act as a powerful means of enabling racially minoritised groups to 'speak back' about racism and facilitate 'psychic preservation' (Tate 1997: 220); a means for psychological and spiritual empowerment in response to the depleting effects of racism.

CRT scholars are not making up stories – they are constructing narratives out of the historical, socio-cultural and political realities of their lives and those of people of color. (Ladson-Billings 2006: xi)

Story-telling has the potential to act as a persuasive and potentially transformative tool to challenge liberal racist ideology (Rollock 2012). The approach has been taken up by a number of prominent CRT theorists (Delgado 1999; Williams 1991) but Derrick Bell's scholarship is undoubtedly the most well known and influential. Bell uses chronicles (metaphorical tales) as a powerful and compelling means of critically examining and revealing racial and legal injustices (see Bell 1980; 1992; 2009).

4. Interest Convergence

Racism serves to reinforce and advance White Supremacy, helping to maintain a status quo that while disproportionate or inequitable to racial minorities allows Whites to retain their positions of power. White people therefore have little incentive to work to eradicate racism. However, there are times when greater race equality operates in the perceived interests of White people, and this notion of 'interest convergence' helps to explain how advances can be achieved: 'the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites' (Bell 1980: 523). An analysis of past victories in the struggle for race equality confirms Bell's analysis:

...advances for blacks always coincided with changing economic conditions and the self-interest of elite whites. Sympathy, mercy, and evolving standards of social decency and conscience amounted to little, if anything. (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 18)

Bell has analysed civil rights legislation and demonstrated the modes through which interest convergence operates. The concept has been examined by other critical race theorists in relation to landmark cases and policies that ostensibly advance the interests of race equality but where in reality there is little long-lasting change or improvement in life chances for racially minoritised groups (Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Gillborn 2008).

5. Intersectionality

While CRT is centrally concerned with the structures and relations that maintain racial inequality, it does not operate to the exclusion or disregard of other forms of injustice. It is recognized that no person has a single, simplistic unitary identity. 'Intersectionality', as originally advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, speaks to an understanding of the complex and multiple ways in which various systems of subordination can come together at the same time (Crenshaw 1989). Adopting an intersectional framework allows for the exploration of differences within and between groups taking account of issues such as historical and socio-political context while still maintaining awareness of racial inequalities (Bhopal & Preston 2012; Brah & Phoenix 2004).

Related to intersectionality is the concept of 'differential racialisation' (Delgado & Stefancic 2001:

8) which is concerned with the way in which dominant society racialises and gives focus to different minoritised groups at different times to suit hegemonic arguments of racial superiority and inferiority. An example of differential racialisation in UK education debates positions Chinese and Indian students as both aberrant and unique, 'model minorities' in juxtaposition to their less successful Black and white peers (Gillborn 2008: 146).

Critical Race Theory today

CRT has developed rapidly into a major branch of social theory and has been taken up beyond the United States to include work in Europe, South America, Australia and Africa. It is often denigrated by people working with alternative perspectives who view the emphasis on race and racism as misguided or even threatening. Despite such attacks, which frequently rest on a lack of understanding and oversimplification of the approach, CRT continues to grow and is becoming one of the most important perspectives on the policy and practice of race inequality in the UK.

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Further Resources

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Taylor, E., Gillborn, D. & Ladson-Billings, G. (eds)(2009) *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*. New York: Routledge. This is the first collection to bring together key writings in both legal and education CRT.

The first major collection of CRT in the UK can be downloaded free at:

www.lulu.com/product/paperback/atlantic-crossings-international-dialogues-on-critical-race-theory/15254151

Critical Race Studies in Education Association www.crseassoc.org – a membership based organization of scholars and activists working to promote racial justice in education. Based in the US, the association also welcomes international members and hosts an annual conference.

A special issue on Critical Race Theory in England will be published by the journal *Race Ethnicity and Education* in early 2012 www.tandf.co.uk/journals/cree