

# Chapter 4

## Framing Critical Race Theory and Methodologies



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**Abstract** Critical Race Theory (CRT) is now a prominent framework for critical scholarship on race and racism in the field of education. Our goal is to introduce CRT as a formative theoretical and methodological framework for social justice and equity-minded educational researchers. The chapter is divided into three sections: (1) key terms and concepts, (2) broader history of CRT, and (3) critical race methodologies in education. By tracing CRT's trajectory in educational research and analyzing the significance of its legacy, we provide an alternative framework to analyze how racism is institutionalized through research-based or legalized "truths" that too often continue to perpetuate the oppression of minoritized communities. In doing so, we illuminate the significance of critical race analysis in educational research and the implications to reframe current discussions regarding the relation of research and the struggle for social justice.

In today's "education can fix all" political climate, it is important for social justice and equity-minded researchers to critically reflect on how society functions and the role of schools within it. One theoretical framework that education scholars have substantively drawn from to both analyze and challenge existing social conditions regarding race and its intersections is critical race theory (CRT). Growing in influence over the past two decades, CRT is now a prominent framework for critical scholarship in the field of education among those studying the role of race and racism in educational policy, practice, and the relation between schooling and society.

Our goal is to introduce CRT as a formative theoretical and methodological framework for social justice and equity-minded educational researchers. This chapter is divided into three sections: (1) key terms and concepts, (2) broader history of CRT, and (3) critical race methodologies in education. By tracing CRT's trajectory

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## What is Critical Race Theory?

As a theoretical and methodological framework, CRT has no canonical doctrines or methods. Rather, as Ladson-Billings (1998) explains, CRT research is unified by “two common interests: (1) understand white supremacy and subordination of people of Color; (2) change the bond that exists between law and racial power” (p. 14). Yet the range of critical and activist scholarship within the umbrella of critical race studies is anchored by what are commonly understood to be central tenets regarding the study of race and racism. Before outlining these central tenets of CRT scholarship, it is important to note some key definitions as connected to the overarching goal of CRT.

As critical race studies views knowledge as power, CRT is both an intellectual and political project that aims to illuminate and challenge racism simultaneously. Within this framework, the overarching purpose of CRT that is most often referenced is the eradication of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating oppression in all its axes and forms (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). Though there are multiple definitions for race among CRT researchers, all focus on the fact that race itself is socially constructed, rather than stemming from natural differences, in ways that are both historically specific and contested manners. As Omi and Winant (2015) state, “race is a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” that are characterized as distinct through various contested racial projects they describe as the process of racialization (p. 111).

The fact that race is socially constructed does not mean that it does not have real effects in society. Rather, as Banks (1995) explains, race is “a human invention constructed by groups to differentiate themselves from other groups, to create ideas about the ‘Other,’ to formulate their identities and to defend the disproportionate distribution of rewards and opportunities within society” (p. 22). The real material and ideological effects of race’s social construction is key for critical race scholars. Likewise, racism can be characterized as a racial project that “creates or reproduces structures of domination based on racial significations and identities” (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 128). In modern US society, White supremacy is the dominant racializing ideology that produced and legitimated various racial projects including Black slavery, Native American genocide, and segregation and anti-miscegenation laws separating and privileging those deemed “White” from “non-White.” Thus, CRT scholars like Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll (2002) often posit that in US society today racism is largely synonymous with the support and maintenance of White supremacy.

Drawing from these concepts of race and racism, there are a few central tenets that have broadly shaped CRT research from its nascent first years in the field of

education. In what is understood to be the foundational CRT article in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue for a CRT perspective in education based on three propositions: (1) race continues to be significant in the US; (2) US society is based on property rights rather than human rights; and (3) the intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool for understanding inequity. Ladson-Billings (1998) expands on this initial thesis by positing that there are four central tenets for CRT-based research: (1) race as normalized; (2) critique of liberalism; (3) interest convergence; and (4) use of storytelling and experiential knowledge. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully develop each of these tenets, we offer a brief explanation for each below:

### ***Race as Normalized***

CRT centers on the seeming permanence of race as a significant, institutionally embedded part of US society and institutions in such a way that people take the idea of race and racial difference to be normal or natural rather than socially constructed and contested. For example, when studying the school-to-prison pipeline, a CRT scholar would likely focus on why US schools normalize the racialized disparities in disciplinary rates rather than take as normalized fact that Black and Brown students are “naturally” predisposed to behavioral issues (Fasching-Varner, Mitchell, Martin, & Bennett-Haron, 2014).

### ***Critique of Liberalism***

CRT centers on critiquing the limits of liberalism privileging of value of liberal ideas of individual freedoms and rights as the primary tool to combat racism, and instead emphasizes the material relations embedded in racism, or what is referred to as “race realism” (Bell, 1992), including the relation of property and human rights in US law such as the valorization of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). For example, when studying the Civil Rights Movement, a CRT scholar would likely focus on its contradictory history by addressing the material legacies of racism, rather than accepting the liberal narrative celebrating the triumph of enlightenment over the supposed irrational racism of Jim Crow (Crenshaw, 1988).

### ***Interest Convergence***

CRT centers on race and racism as materially determined such that people of Color historically have made significant gains only to the extent that their interests aligned with White interests. For example, when studying the origins of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, a CRT scholar would likely focus on how 1960s federal policymakers’

interests aligned with Latinx activists such that policymakers gained more from redirecting activists more radical demands into educational reforms, rather than view the bill as a singular victory for Latinx activists or ability of liberal policymakers to simply recognize and do right (Sung, 2017).

### *Storytelling and Experiential Knowledge*

CRT centers on the importance of legitimating the voices and experiential knowledge of people of Color that are too often minimized in traditional research through methods such as counter-storytelling. For example, when studying the history of Latinx student protest movements in Los Angeles, a CRT scholar would likely focus on developing analyses that center on how Latinx youth explain their own school experiences rather than statistical demographic data that too often lead to pathologizing Latinx students by defining them through a deficit discourse (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

As an example of how CRT can be understood as an umbrella movement, another of the earliest major CRT scholars Solórzano (1997) offered what has now been regularly referenced as five key tenets of CRT as a theory and methodology: (1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches. Clearly some of these tenets overlap with the four previously offered, including the centrality of race in modern society, the challenge to dominant ideology (which typically is understood to be the ideology of liberalism in the academy, though this could obviously apply other mainstream ideologies such as conservatism, nativism, neoliberalism, etc.), and centrality of experiential knowledge. However, Solórzano also explicates three additional points in his list that CRT scholarship in education consistently references:

### *Intersectionality*

CRT centers on illuminating how marginalization and oppression often occur at the intersections among the social systems that fundamentally structure modern society such as racism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, as well as expanded to nationalism, ethnocentrism, and ableism. For example, when studying disproportional inclusion practices for African American students, a CRT scholar would likely focus on the intersection of race, class, culture, and language with the assumptions made regarding ability/disability, rather than assuming a student's placement in special education as the single unitary marker of importance separate from these other intersecting axes within which schools are structured and students are categorized (Zion & Blanchett, 2011).

### ***Commitment to Social Justice***

CRT centers on race research based on a social justice-based praxis that simultaneously aims to illuminate and actively challenge racism and intersecting axes of domination. For example, when studying the educational protests of Black and Brown communities in Chicago against choice of school openings that benefit urban gentrification, a CRT scholar would likely highlight their dual role as both a researcher and participant who actively stands in resistance to oppression as part of their scholarship, rather than seeing research as necessarily “objective” and deciding to take a “neutral” position when studying manifestations of racism (Stovall, 2016).

### ***Interdisciplinary Approaches***

CRT centers on moving beyond artificial disciplinary boundaries or canon, and toward researching race by engaging in a multitude of schools of thought and traditions including those often marginalized from traditional academic spaces in the US. For example, when studying the community cultural wealth that minoritized youth of Color often draw from, a CRT scholar would likely examine culture through a range of disciplinary perspectives and schools of thought including Ethnic Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Marxism, Sociology, and Critical Legal Studies, rather than taking a single disciplinary lens in isolation as the best strategy to do the research (Yosso, 2005).

While the above list obviously does not cover the full range of key ideas and influences, it does offer the central tenets that are most commonly referenced across critical race research in the field of education along with one characteristic example of CRT-based scholarship that adhered to each tenet. Like any theoretical framework, understanding the significance of CRT for social justice and equity-minded scholars studying race today requires taking stock in the origins of CRT and its expanding trajectory in the education field over the past two decades.

## **Critical Race Theory’s History and Trajectory**

Derrick Bell is widely recognized as a founding figure in CRT. Prior to his tenure at Harvard Law School, Bell was a civil rights lawyer with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) where he worked under Thurgood Marshall at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Pivotal to Bell’s early academic work during the 1970s was understanding why the early civil rights efforts like the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) US Supreme Court case succeeded during a conservative period best known for anti-communist McCarthyism, while

civil rights gains stalled in the 1970s after an unprecedented decade of legal successes and broader social change. Among his seminal studies, Bell's (1980) analysis of the decision via the thesis of interest convergence has become one of the leading frameworks within *Brown* historiography and, in doing so, helped create the new interdisciplinary subfield of CRT.

According to Bell, *Brown* occurred due to an interest convergence between Black communities struggling for racial justice and White elites concerned about Soviet propaganda regarding Jim Crow that dissipated by the 1970s with declining Cold War anxieties. By focusing on race as the central analytic, CRT grew as a response during the 1980s to Critical Legal Studies that Bell and others critiqued as being too centered on class-based analyses (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). However, the origin of CRT in legal studies belies the important social and scholarly movements that heavily influenced CRT's analyses. As Crenshaw (1988) notes, she and other early critical race scholars borrowed from several traditions including cultural nationalism, postmodernism, and Black feminist thought. These schools of thought also drew from various 1960s–1970s social movements for inspiration including the Civil Rights Movement, Black and allied (Brown, Yellow, Red) Power Movements, Second and Third Wave Feminist Movements, and the Third World Liberation Front's movement for Ethnic Studies.

CRT has since grown into other social science and allied areas starting in the 1990s including ethnic studies, women's studies, education, sociology, art history, public health, and social work (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). However, the primary residence of critical race scholarship beyond legal studies is currently the field of education, which seems to be a natural fit as education continues to be the principle CRT topic in legal studies including racial desegregation (Bell, 1980; Singleton, 2007), school finance reform (Adamson, 2006), educating undocumented youth (Lopez, 2005), affirmative action (Bell, 2003), or school choice (Dickerson, 2005).

The rise of CRT in the field of education in the 1990s can be traced to a similar critique of Critical Pedagogy that was leveled in the 1970s toward Critical Legal Studies, arguing that both marginalized the fundamental significance of race in their analyses (Leonardo, 2013). As outlined in Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) foundational article, CRT provides an analytic tool to better focus critical scholarship on racial justice and equity in education. Critical race studies is now the dominant framework for scholarship among critical education scholars studying race and racism including research on teacher education and preparation (Juarez & Hayes, 2014; Leonardo & Boas, 2013; Milner, 2008), college athletes (Donnor, 2005), desegregation (Leigh, 2003), inclusion (Zion & Blanchett, 2011), intercultural education (Caraballo, 2009), affirmative action (Park & Liu, 2014), undocumented students (Allen, 2015; Buenavista, 2018), educators of Color (Blaisdell, 2016; Davila & Aviles, 2018), and media on education (Gillborn, 2010).

Over the past two decades, CRT in education studies has also developed into an umbrella for a range of analytic branches that both draw from critical race scholarship and highlight the often intersecting and contradictory racial geographies present in schooling (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Lynn & Parker, 2006). These "sister crit" frameworks include LatCrit (Davila & Aviles de

Bradley, 2010; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2006), AsianCrit (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Curammeng, Buenavista, & Cariaga, 2017; Iftikar & Museus, *in press*; Museus & Iftikar, 2014), BlackCrit (Dumas & Ross, 2016), TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005; Haynes Writer, 2008), and critical whiteness studies (Leonardo, 2009; Hayes & Hartlep, 2013; Matias, 2016). In addition, critical race scholarship has intersected with other scholarly traditions including feminism and particularly critical race feminism (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Sampson, 2016), critical social theory (Melamed, 2011; Leonardo, 2013), antiblackness (Dumas, 2016; Parker, 2017; Sung, 2018), settler colonialism (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, & Cornthassel, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012), and coloniality (de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017; Hsu, 2015; Patel, 2014) and dis/ability (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013).

## Critical Race Methodologies in Education

Methodologically, CRT has also grown from its legal roots as it develops in the field of education. While CRT was originally used in legal studies as a framework to analyze patterns in court cases and legal precedent, in the field of education focus on methodology that highlights experiential knowledge and voice has been key. As such, the primary narrative of critical race scholars in education has traditionally focused on counter-storytelling or *testimonios* of students and communities racialized as non-White (Bernal, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2006). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) employ counter-stories to reframe the study of race and racism by starting with the experiences of those who have been minoritized through daily racial microaggressions (Alvarez, 2017; Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Originating from LatCrit, *testimonios* is another method that draws on experiential knowledge as a means to both critique traditional research that privilege the scholar's perspective and validate the personal and collective knowledge among minoritized communities (Pérez Huber, 2008), as well as those racialized as non-White who are in institutional positions of power (Alemán, 2009; Sampson, 2018).

Critical race scholarship in education also employs the study of history and historical cases as a critical method, similar to the revisionist historical study of the *Brown* decision and other legal cases that Bell (1980) and others researched in the field of law. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) note, the power of historical storytelling and historiographical revision is important to properly understanding and challenging injustices past, present, and future. One example of this critical race history method is the study of the historical context surrounding racially segregated schools in Oxnard, California, and the stories of the lived experiences of Mexican American youth during the early twentieth century (Garcia, Yosso, & Barajas, 2012). A second example is the study of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act and its origin as a hegemonic interest convergence between the 1960s federal policymakers

and Latinx activists, formatively shaping the contradictions that bilingual education still struggles with today (Sung, 2017).

Another methodological tool employed by critical race educational scholars is the interrogation and reframing of curriculum and pedagogies across different subject areas in teacher education. For example, Critical Race English Education (CREE) focuses on challenging antiblackness and White supremacy in English and Language Arts (ELA) classrooms through studying the value of Black literacies as part of reimagining classrooms as sites for healing and racial justice (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017; Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Baszile, 2017). Other examples of CRT methods being employed in the study of subject matter areas include everything from bilingual education (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017) and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) education (Crump, 2014; Liggett, 2014) to math education (Larnell, Bullock, & Jett, 2016; Terry, 2011).

In addition, critical race scholarship has recently expanded from more qualitative, interpretive methods as central to critical race praxis (Stovall, 2016) toward reimagining how to include quantitative methodology, which was typically critiqued as privileging a seemingly objective, essentialistic analysis. The recent evolution of QuantCrit challenges the notion that the “numbers can speak for themselves” and encourages researchers to question the assumptions that result from the analysis of big data (Garcia, Lopez, & Velez, 2018; Gillborn, Warmington, & Demack, 2018). QuantCrit builds on the work of other critical race scholarship including TribalCrit’s work in Indigenous Statistics that challenges the absence of indigenous populations in aggregate data (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Walter & Andersen, 2013) as well as Critical Race Spatial Analysis that uses geographic information system (GIS) mapping tools to represent race and how racialized oppression is manifested geographically (Solórzano & Velez, 2016; Morrison, Annamma, & Jackson, 2017).

## Conclusion

While not nearly long enough to comprehensively cover the explosive growth of critical race scholarship in the field of education, this chapter provides an introductory survey of CRT’s central terms and tenets, history of CRT prior to and within education studies, and the range of critical race methods currently employed in educational research. The goal of this chapter is for social justice and equity-minded educational researchers to find inspiration in critical race scholarship as a theoretically and methodologically valuable way of doing research. If so, we hope you will explore CRT further through the selected referenced readings that follow, and contribute to CRT’s continued development in the field of education as a means of both illuminating and challenging dominant race narratives and racist structures.

## Suggested Readings

Richard Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Popular Critical Race Theory primer is concisely written with lots of clear examples. Book is intended to be a first introduction in legal studies, but easily readable and adaptable for the field of education.

Lynn, M., & Dixson, A. (2013). *Handbook of critical race theory in education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Edited collection of essays from foundational Critical Race Theory scholars in the field of education. Book will provide reader a strong understanding of CRT's influence in educational research on race and racism.

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1996). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Edited collection of early Critical Race Theory foundational articles and essays from the field of legal studies. Book will provide reader a strong understanding of CRT's historical trajectory.

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