**INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

by Simon Moss

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| **Introduction** |

**Historical antecedents**

Critical race theory primarily emanated from two movements: critical legal studies and civil rights scholarship. Critical legal studies revolves around the notion that governments develop laws that, either deliberately or inadvertently, maintain the disparities in power across society (Hunt, 1986). That is, laws that might seem impartial often disadvantage particular demographics, such as members of marginalised races, rather than redress injustice or disparity. As a simple illustration, to earn some rebate, individuals might need to complete a challenging form in English—a form that members of some marginalized communities might be unable to complete. To counteract this problem, proponents of critical legal studies attempt to characterize the effects of legal decisions on the psychological, social, and economic wellbeing of marginalized constituencies.

**Overview of critical race theory**

Critical race theory extends these insights to explore how many spheres of society—such as discourse in academia and the media—perpetuate these disparities. Specifically, proponents of critical race theory explore the laws and practices that promote and maintain this disparity, such as White supremacy in America. The ultimate aim of this exploration is to redress the effects of these laws and practices, ultimately to diminish these disparities—sometimes called racial emancipation or anti-subordination

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| **Perspectives on race and racism** |

Proponents of critical race theory explore and challenge many existing perspectives on race and racism. The first column in the following table outlines some existing mainstream perspectives about race and racism, often promulgated by members of the dominant race—such as White Americans in America. The second column outlines some alternative perspectives, as advocated by various proponents of critical race theory.

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| Mainstream perspectives  about race and racism | Alternative perspectives  about race and racism |
| The distribution of jobs, wealth, and power in society is usually fair. Racism is not systemic but can be ascribed to the acts and decisions of a confined number of aberrant and irrational wrongdoers | Racism should not be ascribed to a confined segment of society but is systemic and reinforced by the laws and customs of the land (Freeman, 1995). |
| Racism is overt | Oppressed individuals continually experience confined acts of racism, perpetrated deliberately or unwittingly—like water that gradually erodes a rock (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). These acts are sometimes called **microaggression**. White privilege, such as the capacity to walk around a store without close surveillance from a clerk, is often subtle (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993) |
| Racism can be readily eradicated | Because of **structural determinism**—the notion that legal thought and cultural practices significantly affect vital outcomes such as disparity in power—many of the determinants of racism are embedded in society and dissociated from awareness. Consequently, these forces cannot be readily addressed (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993) |
| Racism has already been largely eradicated, demonstrating how members of the dominant culture are often concerned about the needs and rights of marginalised races | As Derrick Bell underscored, past advances in civil rights are often motivated by the self-interest of mainstream elites—such as the motivation to improve their image to other nations and thus attract allies (cited in Delgado & Stefancic, 1993) |
| Marginalized races should integrate and assimilate into mainstream society. Indeed, people should not even contemplate race—a perspective called **colour blindness** | To redress the injustices of modern society, people need to appreciate the lived experience and racial discrimination that members of marginalised races often endure. To achieve this goal, people thus should not avert their attention from the realities of race (see DuBois, 1903/2003) |
| Races are fundamentally different to one another. People tend to be members of one race or another race. | Existing racial categories are social constructions and not underpinned by any biological basis (Zack, 2001). In addition, people tend to dismiss the notion of mixed races (Zack, 2001) |

Nevertheless, even within the confines of critical race theory, scholars diverge on the perception of race and racism. A subset of these scholars, for example, believe that attempts to dismiss the notion of race—called racelessness—would foster inclusion, diminish oppression, and equalize the levels of empowerment that individuals enjoy (see Shuford, 2001)

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| **Research and race** |

Critical race theory also challenges traditional practices in science, research, and scholarship. In particular, according to proponents of critical race theory, all facets of research—the choice of research questions, the collection of data, the analysis of data, and the communication of findings—are inevitably and inherently political (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). That is, these choices depend on the motives or positions of individuals and, therefore, are not objective and unbiased. To illustrate

* academic outlets promulgate only research that fulfils standards that deviate from the existing practices of marginalised races, such as Indigenous communities (see Brown, 1995); consequently, these marginalised races are not granted the same legitimacy or opportunity to voice their perspectives
* similarly, academic traditions imply that proper discourse should be expressed in English and written in research papers that follow a particular set of standards—standards that are not as entrenched in Indigenous and marginalized communities (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000)

Proponents of critical race theory believe that, to address disparities, members of marginalised races should not restrict themselves to the research practices of mainstream society. As Audre Lorde (1984) wrote "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house”. DuBois (1903/2003) proposed the notion that a talented tenth of the African American population should assume the responsibility to lead and to redress the injustices, using the methods of inquiry that suit their distinct needs and capabilities. Specifically, in lieu of the research practices that pervade academic orthodoxy, proponents of critical race theory tend to advocate the role of stories, anecdotes, and narrative in research for several reasons (Brown, 1995)

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| Benefit of stories | Details |
| Stories are more natural to members of many communities | Stories are often a central feature of many Indigenous cultures around the world—and, thus, are often a more natural means of expression |
| Stories challenge the supremacy of objectivity | Stories underscore the significance of lived experience; these stories demonstrate that people who have experienced some phenomenon develop unique and valuable insights about these settings and circumstances. Consequently, researchers appreciate that valuable knowledge is not unbiased and objective but personal and special to the individual |
| Stories are vivid and thus more informative | Stories are replete with details and thus powerfully informative. These stories can offer vivid insights into the constraints that impinge on individuals in various communities |
| Stories prevent dehumanization and thus promote respect | Stories and narratives depict the human challenges and capabilities of marginalized communities. Individuals from these communities are more likely to be respected than dehumanized. The privileges that dominant cultures enjoy no longer seem as justifiable and inevitable (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) |
| When people listen, storytellers feel respected | People are more likely to feel respected when researchers listen to their stories or narratives rather than interrogate these individuals with questions. In many communities, individuals associate such questions with brutality and exploitation (Dunbar, 2001). |

Besides the role of narrative, proponents of critical race theory often challenge the tradition that researchers who are not members of a community tend to study that community. Instead, these proponents feel that members of a community are best positioned to study this community. Woodson (1933/2000) highlighted that meaningful nuances and insights are unlikely to be communicated and understood unless the researchers and participants share experiences and epistemologies—or beliefs about how to generate knowledge. Furthermore, members of marginalized communities are more likely to care about the welfare and needs of these communities As Howard Fuller (2000) once wrote about African American researchers: “some folk do research for the sake of doing research while black folk do research to save the lives of black children”

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| **The Latino critical race theory** |

Several key movements and theories have emanated from critical race theory. Intersections theory or intersectionality, for example, considers how other demographics—especially sex or sexual orientation—can affect the impact of race on outcomes in life (Hancock, 2007).

Perhaps the most consequential outgrowth of critical race theory is LatCrit or Latino critical race theory. Whereas critical race theory has primarily devoted attention to disparities between black and white people, LatCrit has also considered the position of other races including Latinos, Asians, LGBTQ, and Indigenous peoples.

Proponents of LatCrit, such as Darder and Torres (2004), challenge several features of critical race theory. First, LatCrit questions the assumption that race should be the principal hub of analysis. Instead, they feel that manifestations of racism in modern society originate from a more pervasive force: the effects of capitalism. Second, LatCrit challenges the supremacy of story and narrative as a tool to underpin change. In particular, proponents of LatCrit express several problems with storytelling in this realm:

* the narratives often homogenize both mainstream society and marginalized communities
* the narratives might reinforce and reify the notion that specific communities are disenfranchised, potentially impeding hope
* the narratives sometimes romanticize the lived experience of marginalized communities

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