Critical Race Theory

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Critical race theory (CRT) is an intellectual movement that seeks to understand how white supremacy as a legal, cultural, and political condition is reproduced and maintained, primarily in the US context. While CRT is part of a much longer research tradition investigating race and racism, which includes such key figures as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and many more, CRT distinguishes itself as an approach that originated within legal studies (in part building from and responding to critical legal studies); aims to be a vehicle for social and political change; has been adopted interdisciplinarily across many fields, including perhaps most notably education; and, in certain contexts, has come to be the umbrella term for studies of race and racism generally.

CRT originated as an extension and critique of critical legal studies (CLS). It was also an outgrowth of Marxist critical theory that challenged the rationality, impartiality, and purpose of the legal system. According to the tenets of both CRT and CLS, the legal system is a political and ideological institution that, in part, rationalizes and justifies the existence of the state. The legal system also requires mastery of an arcane and intentionally inaccessible vocabulary and a set of knowledge and power processes that limit ordinary people's access to it. The arbiters of law pretend to rely on reason but actually rely on subjective, politically motivated, culturally biased, and quasi-religious rationale for making and enforcing their decisions. CRT maintains the critique of legalistic thinking found in critical legal studies, but then adds a framework for understanding white supremacy as an immutable fact of a neocolonial state, as well as a praxis for changing it. What separates CRT from other forms of racial critique is that, "Unlike most of the earlier genres of race scholarship, critical race scholarship does not treat race as an independent variable; rather, it regards race as a site of struggle" (Orbe & Allen, 2008, p. 209).

For example, in *Racial Realism* Derrick Bell (1991) argues that people of color ought to abandon the ideal of equality as it is impossible to attain in the United States. Instead, people of color should seek to confront their victimizers and recognize that the fight itself is "a manifestation of our humanity which survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression, even if that oppression is never overcome" (Bell, 1991, p. 378). Even though CRT scholars recognize race as central, they acknowledge that multiple forms of power and oppression are capable of operating simultaneously and in different registers (Delgado Bernal, 2002); hence, they support intersectional critique. Class,

gender, sexuality, colonization, ability, and other forms of identity and marginalization are all relationships of power that are mutually manifest and that intersect with race and operate synergistically.

Though CRT is rooted in CLS scholarship, CRT broke with CLS, in part because of a failure on the part of many CLS scholars to recognize the centrality of race to law. Thus, CRT can be thought of as both an outgrowth and a departure from CLS, as CRT scholars sought to move the conversation about racism from the margin to the center (Griffin, 2010). Early architects of CRT include Alan D. Freeman and Derrick Bell (Bell, 1976; Freeman, 1977). Both were legal scholars frustrated with the glacial social progress relating to race following the 1950s–1970s civil rights movement and the inability of the legal system to recognize and keep people of color safe from racist discrimination. Rather than continue to place their faith in reform through the legal system, CRT's founders began to use their scholarly work as a form of activism.

CRT's founders sought to change the structures of law, culture, and education by using legal scholarship to produce narratives that contested aspects of the "common sense" of American jurisprudence. Thus, from the perspective of the CRT scholar, attempts to bring about racial equality through the legal system were destined to fail because the legal system was the primary, structural, and disciplinary mechanism for maintaining a white supremacist racial order. However, CRT scholars also believed that it would be possible to change the function of the legal system by producing legal scholarship that undermined white supremacy's hold on juridical thought. By changing the cases studied, as well as the way they were studied, CRT produced scholarly precedents.

As a project, CRT assumes that the production, dissemination, and evaluation of knowledge is fundamentally political and, as such, CRT researchers challenge objectivity, neutrality, and scholarly authority and the way these objectives may be used to distance and separate researchers from material life. Thus, CRT scholars "express skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy" (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993, p. 6). The primary reason CRT is important to the field of communication is that it relies on "rhetorical ideas as both its ideological base and methodology. Critical race theorists argue that speech acts cause racism and that solutions to problems resulting from racism require the use of language to reshape reality" (Olmsted, 1998, p. 324). As such, communication research grounded in, and conversant with, CRT is as much an investigation of the discursive practices that produce and reproduce the racial order as it is a rhetorical intervention against racism. Like many theories generated outside the field of communication and then imported into it, CRT has been taken up within communication long after it became popular within legal studies. Nevertheless, CRT remains highly significant to the field of communication, and its relevance can be seen in recent work published in the field, especially work that explores how communication practices can intervene against racial discrimination (Griffin, 2010; Holling, 2014).

Another aspect to CRT is its emphasis on the real-world effects of race and racism. So, while CRT explicitly challenges racist discourse, it is also crucially aware of the way race and racism affect the bodies, identities, and experiences of people of color. Thus,

it explains how racism, as a social condition, goes well beyond individual, intentional racist acts and must be understood at institutional, social, economic, political, and historical levels. Specifically, work building out of CRT has studied such phenomena as "racial microagressions"—especially the cumulative effects of quotidian experiences with racism in everyday life (De La Garza, 2015). Moreover, CRT scholarship scrutinizes the production and maintenance of white supremacy as a normative, taken-for-granted (and hence naturalized), and "legitimate" regulatory social regime. Despite extant research confronting white supremacy as a political and discursive condition, voices in the field of communication have called for increased attention to racial critique because "the ideology of Whiteness will remain dominantly depoliticized unless more of such scholarship is acknowledged, and we recognize the historically embedded roots of structural racism" (Anguiano & Castañeda, 2014, p. 110). As such, scholars in communication, in particular, have incorporated investigations of whiteness within intercultural, organizational, rhetorical, health, environmental, and interpersonal communication. Scholarship that relies on CRT moves beyond the discrete interrogation of texts and artifacts and situates communication practices within a broader context of white supremacy as the normative mode of political and social organization. This work not only draws attention to whiteness and how it operates but is also a praxeological intervention itself.

Tenets of CRT

Despite the interdisciplinary uptake of CRT throughout the social sciences and humanities, there remains a relatively well-established and agreed-upon set of tenets for guiding CRT scholarship. The first tenet of CRT may seem an obvious one, but is nevertheless central to the critical and scholarly project of CRT: Race still matters (Orbe & Allen, 2008). Viewing race as a central component of scholarship is one of the primary hallmarks of CRT work. Despite notions of a "postracial" America, CRT scholars maintain that white supremacy is a constitutive feature of US life (Olson, 2004; Ono, 2010). Central to CRT work in the field of communication is critical whiteness studies. Such studies make explicit how white supremacy organizes the contexts and content of communication between people of color and mainstream ideological apparatus such as the media, the religious and educational systems. This work exposes the power, complexity, and normativity of whiteness discursively and demonstrates the influence of whiteness on people and the way whiteness is reproduced as a cultural center.

The second tenet of CRT is the centrality of narrative and storytelling as a method of analysis. CRT critiques law and legal studies for not having incorporated people of color into scholarship, as well as for not having changed, structurally, to adapt to perspectives and theories emerging as a result of changes such scholarship requires. One way CRT scholars have sought to make such changes is by producing narratives by people of color, akin to *testimonios* (see below), that inform legal study. These "counterstories" disrupt normative cultural and personal narratives that reify the marginalization of people of color. From the perspective of CRT scholarship, engines of knowledge production

are often deployed to invalidate or refute people of color's individual experiences with racism. Giving voice to people's stories is also a way to validate "experiential knowledge," or the lived experience of people of color, and to push back against institutional investments in maintaining a colorblind facade (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Critics of CRT have suggested that these narratives can and do fall into the trap of essentialism; however, the theory's adherents argue that knowing is a much more complicated process than theorizing, and that counterstory is one of very few methods that find value in the particular and individual experiences of people of color.

The third tenet of CRT entails a critique of liberalism. Additionally, liberalism is associated not with progressivism, but with incrementalism. Hence, CRT aims for more radical institutional changes than reformist ones. The long march is too long. It is also impractical in the face of structural racism and cultural ethnocentrism. One of the reasons for this is that liberalism places too much faith on reform and the legislation of human rights. These ideas tend to be rejected by CRT scholars because they ignore the depths of structural racism that people of color face. The failures of the civil rights movement have led many CRT scholars to reject piecemeal or gradual reform in favor of more radical and revolutionary approaches.

The fourth tenet of CRT is a commitment to social justice. Early CRT work began as a critique of the legal institution and juridical modes of thought. CRT scholarship is often referred to as a political and intellectual movement; as such, many CRT theorists position themselves in opposition to dominant ideological and discursive frames. The field of communication adds to this movement through racial critique of media (Yosso, 2002), investigations into social and political movements (Anguiano, Milstein, De Larkin, Chen, & Sandoval, 2012), institutions, and a commitment to the voices of the marginalized (Holling, 2014).

A fifth tenet of CRT research is an acknowledgment of the importance of interdisciplinarity. CRT scholars recognize that there is a historical relationship between the production of scholarly research and the maintenance of white supremacy. From its inception to the present, CRT research takes up a marginalized position in academic journals as much by necessity as design. Thus, CRT scholars have learned to move across disciplinary boundaries in order to find opportunities to connect with other relevant bodies of literature and to share their scholarship with others. The move to interdisciplinarity is instrumental to the broad dissemination and uptake of CRT scholarship across academic disciplines, and contributes to CRT's continued relevance as a theoretical paradigm.

CRT methodology

In addition to counterstories being a theoretical contribution of CRT, they are also a methodology of sorts that challenges discrimination and works toward social justice by "talking back" to rationalist and social-scientific research that supports racialized and marginalizing notions about people of color. Counterstories may be narratives constructed using empirical evidence, they may be amalgamations of many people's personal experience (often called composite stores), or they may even be completely

fictional parables that use exaggerated circumstances to address contemporary racial issues. The most influential of these (of the fictional sort) is an article by Derrick Bell titled "The Space Traders" (1992). In it, Bell uses a short science-fiction story to argue that people of color are sacrificed to benefit the white majority. Rather than argue that this exploitation ended with the civil rights movement, Bell describes a present in which the majority disavows racism, but is still willing to act in racist ways. Despite the elements of fiction, these stories are nearly always supported by traditional legal means of substantiation such as historical events, legal precedents, and the like, as well as more qualitative research of other scholars.

Counterstories rely on the power of people's "voices." According to Delgado (1990), "voice" results from the shared experiences of the structures of systems of power. People of color are unified (not essentialized) by their experiences of navigating the structures of power that marginalize them. They all have stories of times when they were dismissed, ignored, even oppressed. These experiences shape the way they interact with and understand the world. More importantly, in the stories of others we are able to recognize our own voices, our own experiences, and our own struggles within the narrative. It is this ability to create affect, to share and empathize, and to witness that makes voice such an important part of CRT scholarship.

Critical race methodology must foreground race and racism in all the parts of the research process from inception to write up (Yosso, 2002). This awareness of the primacy of race is central to CRT scholarship in several ways. The first is that critical race scholars will ask questions from a perspective that recognizes the centrality of race. This allows them to be reflexive about their relationship to research participants, which avoids or at least minimizes the irresponsible use of scholarly privilege. The history of scholarship is littered with academics who exploited, misrepresented, or ignored the voices of people of color they studied (Solomon, 1985). In order to avoid this type of abuse, CRT methodology self-reflectively recognizes power as an intersectional problematic that cuts across social identities, and recognizes that researchers must be diligent in their willingness to see difference and respect the people with whom they work.

CRT methodology also challenges traditional paradigms that marginalize the experiences of people of color. The reason a CRT stance takes an oppositional approach to research is to ensure rigor and to produce research that confronts master narratives. CRT researchers look to challenge issues that appear settled and to destabilize normalized discourses. Adherents describe CRT as an activist movement and, as such, CRT methodology aims to locate liberatory and transformational solutions to the problems facing people of color.

In order to make social change, CRT scholarship has even developed a "critical race epistemology," an alternative to empiricist or rationalist paradigms. CRT scholars suggest one can begin to engage a critical race epistemology by maintaining focus on two principles. The first is that knowledge production is political. To make knowledge is to exert power over the social, which requires privileges accessible to only a very few. Second, there is radical potential in alternative epistemologies that foreground the perspectives of people of color. CRT epistemology appropriates the academic space as a site of struggle, employs a critique of power, and ultimately challenges racial hegemony.

Extensions and critiques

Critiques of CRT tend to focus on a few of its perceived weaknesses. Critics of CRT attack the notion of objectivity. In a world of increasingly aversive forms of racial oppression, such as racial microaggressions, racism is often difficult to identify objectively. While most CRT research relies on empirical examples of material and social disparity, objective measures have difficulty demonstrating the cause. CRT scholars respond to these critiques by arguing that objectivity is a myth, one that is historically deployed to justify inequality and deflect racial criticism. A second critique leveled at CRT is that it is ultimately an essentialist racial paradigm. Critics argue that, by saying that all people of color experience racism, CRT scholars are participating in a flattened depiction of individual experiences. Thus, one can never attain the personal nuances that CRT scholars (paradoxically) call for. Furthermore, by highlighting an essential experience for Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, and black people, CRT scholars destroy opportunities for coalition-building across racial lines. However, CRT scholars respond to these critiques by centering white supremacy as a constitutive feature of race-based critique. Therefore, each individual may experience differential levels and forms of marginalization while at the same time each individual can attack the structures that reproduce white supremacy, which becomes the source for building coalitions across raced, classed, and gendered lines.

LatCrit theory is a complement to and an extension of CRT and is by far the most used version of CRT in communication. LatCrit, like many of the other forms of "-Crit" theories (FemCrit, TribalCrit, DesiCrit), breaks from CRT because of CRT's overemphasis on the black/white binary. Though these alternative Crits subscribe to all of the tenets of CRT, they also include tools to address the particularity of issues and experiences affecting different marginalized groups. LatCrit organizes itself around a pan-Latino identity, or Latinidad, by taking ownership of intersecting histories of colonization, migration, dispossession, and exploitation in the Americas. Rather than essentializing one particular "Latin" experience, LatCrit recognizes differential experiences, while noting the common structures of power that are activated around issues of ethnicity, indigeneity, sexuality, identity, and discrimination. The place where LatCrit theory departs from critical race theory is where it challenges the black/white binary drawn by CRT and argues that there are a range of racialized identities in the United States, each defined differently as marginal to whiteness but performed and enforced through different discourses and technologies of power. LatCrit is particularly invested in issues arising from language difference, colonization, nativism, and the immigration experience.

LatCrit often relies on *testimonio*—a technique for political storytelling. *Testimonio* is a form of political witnessing that affirms the experiences of the storyteller and transforms the listener into a witness (Holling, 2014). *Testimonio* arises from this tradition of confronting power, of asserting a right to exist, of refusing to be silenced. Both counter-story and *testimonio* as methods recognize that narratives are a powerful way of creating and transmitting knowledge. These methods reflect a different set of ontological and epistemological commitments than traditional social-scientific research, because they

center the lived experiences of people at the margins, recognize that anyone can be a holder and creator of knowledge, and seek to counter or disrupt majoritarian narratives.

Another critique and extension of critical race theory is TribalCrit. Like LatCrit, TribalCrit was developed to address gaps in CRT with respect to American Indians. While CRT serves as the framework, it fails to address the legal/political and racialized liminality of Native Americans (Brayboy, 2005). TribalCrit also takes into account the experiences of colonization including language shift or loss, tribal sovereignty, and indigenous epistemologies.

Nine tenets define TribalCrit:

1. The consequences of colonization are endemic to US society.
2. US treatment of indigenous people is inseparable from cultural and economic imperialism, white supremacy, and the economic exploitation of indigenous people and their land.
3. Indigenous people exist in a liminal space that accounts for their political and cultural marginalization. This liminality is also fundamental to the process of identity formation of indigenous people.
4. Indigenous people seek tribal sovereignty, autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. A TribalCrit lens produces new possibilities for concepts of culture, knowledge, and power.
6. Assimilation is a problematic goal, and government and educational polices directed at indigenous peoples attempt to produce and enforce assimilation.
7. "Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429).
8. There is no distinction between indigenous stories and theory. Stories make theory and are legitimate ontologies and avenues of research.
9. TribalCrit is praxis-driven research, and its practitioners must gear their research toward social change.

Like CRT, AsianCrit is critical of liberal attempts at racial reform. It relies heavily on narratives as both a method and an artifact of study and is critical of rationalist and empiricist paradigms. However, AsianCrit emphasizes and critiques the racist and nativist dimensions of (for example) the racial history of immigration law and policies, language legislation, educational discrimination, unfair labor practices based on law, the hypersexualization of Asian women, the emasculation of Asian men, queer theory, the marginalization and disempowerment associated with the model minority and other nefarious stereotypes, and the legacies of the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans, the social, legal, political, economic, and cultural regulation of Filipina/o American, Korean American, Chinese American, South Asian American, Japanese American, and Southeast Asian American bodies, and the segregation and representation of Asian Americans as an undifferentiated or flattened depiction of the other.

SEE ALSO: Afrocentricity; American Studies; Critical Theory; Cultural Studies; Ethnic Studies; Narrative Inquiry; Objectivity and Subjectivity; Postcolonial Theory

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