

# Critical Race Theory: Origins, Principles, Applications, and Evidence

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**Abstract:** *Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a unique analytic lens through which to examine and ultimately dismantle racism within United States society. CRT has been applied to a variety of contexts including education, therapy, and law. Little is known about the application of CRT to the field of social work. This paper aims to investigate the ways in which CRT has been applied to the field of social work. Utilizing major academic databases, the researcher identified 617 unique references. A total of 14 articles were included in this review following exclusion criteria and full-text review. This paper provides an overview of CRT and its potential to inform social work practice.*

**Keywords:** *Social work, Critical Race Theory, racism*

Within the last ten years, awareness has increased regarding the systemic nature of racism. Racism can, for example, emerge through mortgage redlining (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Riccucci, 2021), the school to prison pipeline (Crawley & Hirshfield, 2018; Dutil, 2020), and racist hiring practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Riccucci, 2021). Systemic, racially skewed outcomes are also apparent in the child welfare system (Cénat et al., 2021; Feely & Bosk, 2021), education (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Pak, 2021), healthcare (Feagin & Bennefield, 2014; Hamed et al., 2022), and criminal justice system (Rucker & Richeson, 2021; Najdowski & Stevenson, 2022). These patterns are imperative for social workers to identify and ultimately dismantle. Despite being applied to other professions including law and education. This paper investigates the origins of CRT and examines the extent to which CRT has been applied in the social work field.

## Origins

Legal scholars developed Critical Race Theory (CRT) to reflect the ways in which racism emerges in American law (Matsuda, 1990; Solorzano, 1997; West, 1995). Freeman (1978) applied Critical Legal Studies to examine how some legal implications of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) were at best, complex, and in fact an avenue through which discrimination continued. He rather shockingly posited that *Brown v. Board of Education* was created by white elites to serve their own purposes and not, in fact, to end segregation on moral grounds (Freeman, 1978; West, 1995). Following this seminal work, Bell (1980) published two essays foundational to the development of CRT. He posited law is in fact neither a neutral nor dependable system by which to attain racial equality. Bell argued that racism is systemic, predictable, and deeply rooted in American law and society. His concept of “interest convergence” suggests that racial change is inconvenient for the racial white majority and therefore unlikely to occur unless interests align with white elites. Additional significant scholars of this time include Calmore and Crenshaw, both of whom argued the legal system is a system through which certain racial and ethnic groups are subordinated (Calmore, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995).

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Delgado (1990) introduced what would later evolve into the CRT concept of counternarratives. Delgado posited that a person's race can have an influence when writing about racism (Delgado, 1984). Delgado found that at the time civil rights legal scholars who were published were largely white and largely cited each other, excluding scholarship by legal scholars of color, in effect silencing the scholarly voices of the very people about whom research was written (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

Delgado (2023) asserted the race of a scholar matters in terms of perspective; counterstorytelling by People of Color (PoC) can provide insights that may be unseen or impossible for people of the majority to see. Counterstorytelling fits within the larger epistemological framework of critical theory, which relies on discourse analysis, genealogies, and histories and is distinct from positivist empirical methods. Friere (1970), for example, posited dialogue is a "way of knowing" and an "indispensable component" of the knowing and learning process (p. 17). Foucault similarly argued that power itself produces discourse. Discourse can reinforce power but can also expose and subvert power (Foucault, 1984; Power, 2011). Ultimately these new narratives fight oppression by revealing the experiences of the oppressed.

Another important voice in the formation of CRT is that of Gotanda (2000), who offered a critique of liberalism. Specifically, Gotanda (2000) argued that the concept of colorblindness and preference for race neutrality is not only impossible, but in fact benefits the interests of the racial majority.

Kendi has emerged as a contemporary contributor to CRT. Kendi, a professor of history at Boston University, founded the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research. His seminal book, *How to Be An Antiracist*, explores and develops the CRT concepts of intersectionality, the ways in which White people benefit from structural racism, and systemic racism inherent in the United States criminal justice system. Like previous Critical Race Theorists, Kendi criticizes the notion of colorblindness and asserts his call for action that all people engage in self-reflection to best fight racism in United States society (Kendi, 2019). This follows Fook's (2007) assertion that critical reflection is imperative for social workers. Fook (2007) states this model of self-reflection is

based on the idea that critical reflection involved the identification of deep-seated assumptions, but with the primary purpose of bringing about some improvements in professional practice. (p. 2)

In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate applied CRT to the field of education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) made the following three propositions about education, based on CRT: "(1) race continues to be significant in the United States; (2) U.S. 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 & Tate, 1995, p. 55). CRT, they argued, can provide a lens through which scholars and educational practitioners can understand and dismantle racism within the education system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997).

Following Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) application of CRT to the field of education, multiple fields have since incorporated CRT into their scholarly community,

including the Latino community (LatCrit; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valdes, 1997), the Asian American community (Chang, 1993; Liu, 2009), the Muslim community (Ali, 2022; Breen, 2017; Breen & Meer, 2020), and LGBT communities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Tuck and Yang (2012) created an Indigenous American version of Critical Race Theory in the early 2010s. They argue that decolonization is not simply a metaphor for wanting to change aspects of schools and societies. Like CRT, decolonization is systemic, and society must address uncomfortable realities before positive change can occur (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This follows Mezirow's (2000) assertion that transformative education must include one being uncomfortable for learning to be transformative. This discomfort includes facing "disorienting dilemmas," examining assumptions about others and self, challenging one's habits of mind are all critical to transformative thinking, and self-examination of uncomfortable feelings including guilt, anger, shame, or fear (Mezirow, 2000).

Within the last 25 years, scholars have suggested that CRT can be applied to the field of social work. Specifically, scholars have posited that CRT can inform social work pedagogy (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Pulliam, 2017; Razack & Jeffery, 2002), social work direct practice (Kolivoski et al., 2014; Quinn & Grumbach, 2015), and intersectionality (Daftary, 2018). CRT, all listed authors agree, can play a pivotal role in social workers effectively understanding and ultimately dismantling systemic racism and oppression. Additionally, the Council on Social Work's Education (2022) Educational and Policy Accreditation Standards include antiracist practice, engagement in the advancement of racial justice, and demonstration of cultural humility through critical reflection.

## Principles

CRT's fundamental principle is its assumption that racism is an endemic part of United States society. This assumption stands in contrast to the Civil Rights Movement, which approached the fight against racism and oppression in a sequential, step-by-step approach to end racism. (West, 1995). According to CRT, the systemic structures of society—economic, legal, social—all operate with racism deeply imbedded in them. CRT's principles are the following six tenets (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2023; Taylor, 1998).

- ***Racism as Ordinary.*** CRT posits that racism is an inherent, endemic aspect of society's very systems including legal, economic, and social systems (Bell, 1992). Whites ultimately occupy a privileged space while people of color are seen as "others" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Racism is so inherent, in fact, it is difficult to even notice and address (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2023; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
- ***Interest Convergence/Materialist Determinism.*** White elites benefit from racism materially and working-class whites benefit psychologically. For this reason, racial change is unlikely to happen as there is little benefit for Whites to fight the very structures that provide them privilege (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2023).

- ***Race as a Social Construction.*** CRT argues that there is no genetic or biological basis of race. Race is instead a concept that is socially constructed and therefore fluid. This concept, as it is a social construct, can be described, examined, and dismantled (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2023).
- ***Differential Racialization.*** The concept of a race can change at different times and for different reasons based on economic or social need (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2023).
- ***Antiessentialism/Intersectionality.*** CRT maintains that forms of oppression can intersect with race. These can include sexuality, class, income, religion, and other ways in which people can be marginalized (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2023).
- ***Unique Voices of Color.*** CRT emphasizes the lived experiences of people of color and that knowledge gained. Experiential knowledge can include family history, biographies, narratives, and counterstorytelling (Bell, 1987). The unique voices of color provide a crucial narrative for racism and its effects that may be difficult and even impossible for Whites to comprehend (Crenshaw et al., 1995, 1995; Delgado, 1984; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2023).

### **Mechanisms of Action/Causation**

The presumptive etiology in Critical Race Theory is that racist outcomes in American societal systems are caused by the endemic nature of racism in American society. Over time, racist societal structures are reinforced, and racist outcomes therefore continue.

### **Explaining Things**

CRT explains things through application of its principles of endemic racism, differential racialization, and interest convergence. The endemic nature of racism, for example, concretely emerges through and explains mortgage redlining (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Riccucci, 2021), racist hiring processes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Riccucci, 2021), and the school-to-prison pipeline (Crawley & Hirshfield, 2018; Dutil, 2020).

Differential racialization explains both why various racial groups' social constructions can change over time. The social constructs of a racial group change based on labor needs and social factors. For example, Asian Americans, once viewed as harmless when the United States required a large labor force, were later perceived as an economic threat when that need changed. Currently, people refer to Asian Americans as a "model minority." The racialization of Muslims stands as another example. While at once appearing perhaps odd but harmless, post-9/11 Muslims were racialized as a dangerous threat to personal safety and national security (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

Interest convergence explains why racial change can be difficult to achieve. Racial change often does not occur because Whites benefit from racist systems. Racial change only happens when the interests of racial change align with those of White elites. As stated above, Bell (1980) provided the example of *Brown v. Board of Education* as an example of racial progress only when that progress benefited White elites. While *Brown v. Board of Education* appeared to promote racial equality and social justice, the decision was in fact made for political self-interest both among Black Americans and to improve credibility internationally.

In 2010, Ortiz and Jani advocated for the incorporation of CRT in social work education. They specifically identified the ways in which CRT theory can identify systemic institutional racism and how this affects marginalized communities. CRT can assist social workers in identifying institutional, structural racism, the intersection of multiple identities and “integrate an explicit social justice orientation” (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p. 175).

**Applications**

This section will review literature on CRT and its application to social work practice. To locate this peer-reviewed scholarship, Academic Search Premier/EBSCOhost, PsycInfo, and JSTOR were the selected databases. Search terms included “critical race theory,” social work,” “racism,” “antiracism,” “intersectionality,” “counternarratives,” “colorblindness,” and combinations of these words. See Table 1 for how the papers were selected for review.

Table 1. *Selection of Papers for Review*

<b>Identification</b>	Databases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic Search Premier/EBSCOhost</li> <li>• PsycInfo</li> <li>• JSTOR</li> </ul>
	Timeframe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9/23/2023-11/30/2023</li> </ul>
	Search Terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Antiracism</li> <li>• Colorblindness</li> <li>• Counternarratives</li> <li>• Critical race theory</li> <li>• Intersectionality</li> <li>• Racism</li> <li>• Social work</li> <li>• Combinations of these words</li> </ul>
<b>Screening</b>	Inclusion Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer-reviewed</li> <li>• Published in English</li> </ul>
	Exclusion Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not peer-reviewed</li> <li>• Not published in English</li> <li>• Studies not focused CRT</li> <li>• Studies not focused on social work</li> </ul>
	Initial Articles Found	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 617</li> </ul>
<b>Eligibility</b>	Final Articles Found	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14</li> </ul>

The application of CRT to social work practice is not yet common (Campbell, 2014; Kolivoski et al., 2014). I was able to locate five studies which examined the application of CRT to social work practice. The studies examined racial competency among social workers (Campbell, 2014), microaggressions (Robinson-Perez et al., 2020), the effects of racial profiling on families (Teasley et al., 2018), police shooting of unarmed Black men (Moore et al., 2018), and the overrepresentation of African American girls in the juvenile justice system (Kolivoski, 2022).

Campbell (2014) applied CRT in the measurement of racial competency among social work practitioners. The social work practitioners, all based in the Midwestern United States and all of whom had at least a master's degree in social work, completed the Critical Race Theory Measurement (CRTM) questionnaire (Campbell, 2014) in an attempt for the author to assess their racial competency. The CRTM is a 19-item scale measuring CRT's six tenets on a Likert scale. The outcome of this study found that while social work practitioners both of color and not of color identified racism as systemic across institutions and daily interactions, the social workers "lacked a clear, concrete understand of race as a social construct" (Campbell, 2014, p. 82).

Robinson-Perez et al. (2020) applied CRT as a framework through which to view and understand microaggressions experienced by undergraduate students of color in a social work graduate program in the Northeastern United States. Through this quantitative study, they found that the systemic nature of racism manifested through microaggressions, which created psychological distress among those students. Robinson-Perez et al. (2020) then urged social workers to apply CRT to increase awareness of microaggressions to better support this population.

Teasley et al. (2018) applied CRT as a theoretical framework to understand the significance of racial profiling and its effects on families of color with the goal of educating social workers to the experiences of these families. Viewing the familial effects of racial profiling through a CRT lens, Teasley et al. (2018) posit, social workers can apply CRT in their treatment planning in the following ways. The concept of counter-storytelling provides social workers a way to learn how to address the existence of racial profiling to better establish rapport with African American male clients. This counternarrative of personal experience in racial profiling is imperative to understand the ways in which African American male clients may have experienced psychological trauma. In addition to comprehending the concept of racial profiling from a CRT systemic racism approach, Teasley et al. (2018) argue CRT can also be applied by the rejection of colorblindness among social workers in their practice.

Moore et al. (2018) applied CRT to their study of police shooting of unarmed Black males. They concluded that CRT be applied to social work through social workers taking on an activist role in "ameliorating the dehumanization of the Black males" (p. 44) by, for example,

identifying specific neighborhoods, companies, or agencies that are involved in discriminatory practices, then mobilizing community resources to address such social iniquity...Further, social work activism can also include influencing police

and legislative outcomes and empowering or collaborating with Black institutions such as the Black church to address this malaise. (p. 44)

Kolivoski (2022) applied CRT to make sense of and analyze the overrepresentation of African American girls involved in both the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system. In this conceptual article, Kolivoski examined the factors of endemic racism and intersectionality as primary causes for the overrepresentation of this population within the juvenile justice system. Kolivoski (2022) concludes with the recommendation that social workers center race and racism in their work by encouraging counter-storytelling. Kolivoski (2022) also states they should be mindful of systemic racism and intersectionality of clients when building rapport and intervention plans with this population. Counter-storytelling would allow, for example, justice-involved African American girls to provide their own narrative of their experiences in the justice system, thereby shifting power away from more stereotypical and deficit-based narratives.

Like Campbell (2014), Robinson-Perez et al. (2020), Teasley et al. (2018), Moore et al. (2018), and Kolivoski (2022), Kendi (2019) advises his concept of antiracism—to identify, describe, and ultimately dismantle racism—be applied to counter microaggressions and to better understand and dismantle systemic racism in the United States criminal justice system and child welfare system.

## **Evidence**

In my search of academic sources, I found few studies that examined the efficacy of CRT's principles. In terms of measuring the efficacy of CRT principles, the literature largely points to the purported inability for the principles of CRT to be qualitatively or quantitatively examined. Specifically, some scholars posit that statistics and quantitative methods of measurement have origins in White supremacy, and therefore these methods of measurement cannot reliably nor ethically measure the validity of CRT principles (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008; Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014). Still other sources posited that CRT is in fact a form of qualitative methodology (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Garcia et al., 2018; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The principles of storytelling, counterstories, positionality and intersectionality can be used to elicit information in studies, thereby making CRT principles collectively its own methodology.

Notably, one dissertation that examined the effectiveness of CRT principles to explain experiences of ethnic minority mothers with incarcerated sons. In-depth, semi-structured interviews of eight ethnic minority mothers with incarcerated sons elicited information about intersectionality. The author concluded that the outcome of their study confirmed the validity of CRT principles. The systems “designed to protect their sons failed them, and their sons suffered the consequences of the inequities” (Mendoza, 2022, p. vi ). In this one study, therefore, the CRT principles were examined and assessed for effectiveness in describing a situation involving systemic racism.

Researchers have assessed teacher efficacy following application of CRT in a school setting. In another dissertation, a student examined the effectiveness that applying CRT has

shown to increase teacher efficacy in post-COVID-19 classrooms (Kent, 2021). A study by Marx and Pennington (2010) examined preservice teachers with CRT being presented as a lens through which to view teaching. This ethnographic studied specifically outcomes of dialogical conversations between White preservice teachers in majority racial minority schools. Marx and Pennington (2010) concluded that applying CRT in a school training setting, White teachers were able to more effectively understand matters related to race and had a new ability to address racism with White students (Marx & Pennington, 2010).

Despite CRT being applied in a variety of contexts, including the criminal justice system and education, studies examining the effectiveness of CRT's principles themselves are highly underdeveloped. Sablan (2018) asserted "predictive, experimental/ quasi-experimental, and evaluative modeling is underdeveloped in regard to CRT" (p. 185) Garcia et al. (2018) stated an "ontological reckoning" (p. 149) regarding historical power relations must occur before quantitative measures can be applied to measuring CRT's applications. A way to begin an ontological reckoning, Garcia et al. (2018) posit, is for quantitative research to be considered in the larger context of political, economic, social, and historical power relations.

Ways to practice CRT in therapy is an underdeveloped topic (Pierson et al., 2022) and are for the most part not yet developed in therapeutic relationships or clinical settings (Taliaferro et al., 2013). Four studies examined the efficacy of applying counter-storytelling in a therapeutic context. Gwathney (2021) examined the use of counter-storytelling as an intervention in a group and individual therapeutic intervention within the context of a school setting. Based on post-intervention data, Gwathney (2021) concluded that counter-storytelling increased the client's participation in therapy and sense of empowerment as a student. Gwathney (2021) also concluded that staff understanding of the client's experience as an African American student increased, as well. Williams (2023) also applied counter-storytelling as an intervention in group therapy. Similar to Gwathney (2021), based on post-intervention data, counter-storytelling increased client engagement in the group therapy, this time in the context of substance abuse treatment among African American adolescents (Williams, 2023). Taliaferro et al. (2013) came to a similar conclusion. Taliaferro et al. (2013) combined counter-storytelling with narrative therapy with clients of color. Based on post-intervention data, they concluded that counter-storytelling increased engagement in therapy sessions. Mbilishaka (2018) combined CRT with narrative therapy to create PsychoHairapy, a practice which may have implications for social work practice. PsychoHairapy refers to therapy that occurs within Black hair care spaces in which a therapist is present and hair care specialists are trained in basic narrative therapy techniques. Following implementation of narrative therapy in this context, the authors concluded, post-intervention measurement, that combining counter-storytelling with narrative therapy allowed clients to effectively process their experiences of racial trauma.

As stated above, a positive outcome of therapy derived from CRT is client participation in individual and group intervention. Another positive outcome is the ability of social workers to gain more information about the impact of racism on their clients, thereby allowing the social worker to create ethical and efficacious interventions for clients of color (Taliaferro et al., 2013; Traham & Lamberg, 2014).



Over the past several years CRT has been accused, however, of a variety of poor outcomes including the indoctrination of young people, promoting racial divides, being racist, and making White students “uncomfortable” in classrooms (Filimon & Ivanescu, 2023; Kendi, 2019; Morgan, 2022; Watson, 2023). K-12 teachers generally do not even teach CRT, making the protests against CRT being taught in classrooms rather odd (Morgan, 2022). Recent legislation in various states has restricted the mention of Critical Race Theory in classrooms (Green, 2022; Kim, 2021; Schwartz, 2022). The criticism of CRT has manifested in such contexts as the disruption of school board meetings and the creation of anti-CRT rallies (Lopez et al., 2021). Some researchers have described the strong reactions as “anti-CRT panic” (Filimon & Ivanescu, 2023, p.183) and “hysteria” (Watson, 2023, p. 503). Watson (2023) suggested CRT is a way to “have honest engagement about systemics of oppression” (p. 488) in school settings as well as in other contexts. As of 2025, however, the backlash against CRT continues (Conyers & White Fields, 2025; Karakaya & Egdell, 2025). In spite of politicized and spurious claims that CRT may cause harm, CRT bans have been shown to harm the racial climate of schools and lead to teachers leaving the classroom entirely (Jayakumar & Kohli, 2023).

### Conclusion

CRT is a widely used theoretical framework applied in a variety of professional practice contexts including law and education. This paper has examined the origin, central tenets, application, and evidence of CRT in the context of social work. CRT has the potential to be a strong framework by which to inform social work education and practice. Given that the Council on Social Work’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards include antiracist and anti-oppressive practices, CRT offers a practical framework by which to apply antiracist principles in higher education. Social workers should likewise engage in CRT’s urging of self-reflection and rejection of the concept of colorblindness to best fight racism in United States society. Despite stigma against CRT, given the systemic nature of racism in United States society and social work’s dedication toward antiracism, CRT is an imperative theory for social workers to understand and apply to fight racism in their field and in society.

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