Using Critical Race Theory as a Lens to Understand Employer-Supported Education

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Using Critical Race Theory as a Lens to Understand Employer-Supported Education

COABE 2021
Authors:
Jill Castek, Kathy Harris, Gloria Jacobs, Jen Vanek
Land Acknowledgement

It is important to acknowledge the ancestors of the places we live and work and to recognize that we are here because of the sacrifices forced upon them. In remembering these communities, we honor their legacy, their lives, and their descendants.

Kathy Harris and Gloria Jacobs are at Portland State University, which is located in Portland, Oregon. We honor the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Tumwater, Watlala bands of the Chinook, the Tualatin Kalapuya and many other indigenous nations whose traditional and ancestral homelands we stand on.

Jen Vanek's home office in Minneapolis, Minnesota is located on the traditional land of Wahpekute Band of the Dakota Nation.

Jill Castek is at the University of Arizona, which resides on the traditional land of the Tohono O'odham Nation homelands and the lands of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe.
The 21 CLEO research is supported by a generous grant from Walmart. The opinions and ideas expressed on this website are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the funders.
As white women we can only see so much because of our whiteness. We can’t understand racism fully or in the same ways as people of color. We are still learning the discourse of critical race theory. We acknowledge that our whiteness has advantaged us in large and small ways; we’ve benefitted from lifelong white privilege.

We are diving into this work because we are answering the call for whites to do our work; to learn how to see white supremacy and systemic racism and identify how it plays out in our attempt to change it. We do this work with humility, trying to be allies.
What CRT is NOT.

Racism is the norm in the United States

Is a challenge to the dominant ideology

Experiential knowledge is central

Race intersects with gender and other aspects of identity

Has a commitment to social justice

Draws from many disciplines
Critical Race Theory

- Intercentricity of race
- Challenge to dominant ideology
- Centrality of experiential knowledge

Intersectionality
Commitment to social justice
Transdisciplinary knowledge

(Crenshaw, 1991), (Solorzano, 1997), (Bell, 1980), (Yosso, 2005), (Gotanda, 1991), (Closson, 2010)
Why draw on CRT for adult education research?

Race - a construct shaping experience in the US

Embedded into institutional practices and policy

Race intersects with other aspects of identity

Compounds other inequalities: gender, orientation, economic exclusion, language discrimination

Eliminating structural oppression benefits everyone

Recognizing the impact of structural racism and endeavoring to understand how it impacts learners can help us work to mitigate its impact.
This work is part of a larger project focused on understanding a changing and dynamic learning ecosystem

- frontline service workers participate in workforce or employer supported learning opportunities.
- includes data from 45 interviews with worker learners and individuals who provide support to them, such as teachers, managers, and career navigators.
- Interviewees come from all parts of the United States and work in retail, healthcare, hospitality, transportation, and other industries.

Shifting Focuses for Our Work
Sociocultural Lens (CHAT)

- Learners resilience and perseverance
- Strategic Choices
- Independent Learning
Sociocultural Lens (CHAT)

CRT Analysis
Endemic Racism
Capital is differently available
Systems Level Change
A CRT lens helped us go deeper and expanded our understanding of what was going on beneath the surface.
How?

(Crenshaw, 1991), (Solórzano, 1997), (Bell, 1980), (Yosso, 2005), (Gotanda, 1991), (Closson, 2010)
Reflect and respond

Have you heard the term Critical Race Theory before?

What is your reaction to our use of it as a lens to understand the experience of learners?
Adult learners’ lives and perspectives
Key Question

What do the perspectives of adult learners reveal when viewed through a CRT lens?
Analysis Timeline

1. Selected key participant interviews
2. Applied CRT a priori codes
3. Developed emerging theme
4. Conducted theoretical sampling
5. Refined theme and raised new questions
## Working Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prior Education</th>
<th>Current Learning</th>
<th>Current job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>4 yr degree</td>
<td>CNA</td>
<td>Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winta</td>
<td>4 yr degree</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>Retail Cashier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>Dental Assistant</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muhazzim</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>Supervisory course</td>
<td>Database Mgmt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>Some college, Employer sponsored courses</td>
<td>Leadership training</td>
<td>Hourly hotel supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>4 yr degree</td>
<td>Leadership training</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Maggie

“I went to university for four years. I study science economic for four years, and I studied accounting, critical for accountant for one year. And I studied like a computer training for three years. Yes, I did. The job I did for my country ...was in that to work in my bank.”

-From Haiti
-French as a first language
-Bachelor’s degree
-Banking as a former career
-Currently working as a security guard
-Has completed CNA training
-Hopes to become a RN
Winta

[the English class is] too easy for me. So I try more the difficult one, okay? Then I will try-maximize, what you call it maximize my mind?”
Julie

“I found a job as a dental assistant, but it was hard for me. I feel like overwhelming because of my language. So, I had to back up. [I thought], maybe I can volunteer first and get the experience.”
Intersectionality: The role of race/ethnicity, language, and gender
Muhammad

“I keep asking and even, you know, in every evaluation my supervisor commends for me. He said, like, hey, he's the one who will question most of the time, and I love it. He said he literally said, he said, I love it, how much questions you ask, and that's, that's a lot of learning.”
Destiny

Took LinkedIn courses on “what type of person you are and how you deal with people...how to strategize and how to get the team motivated, and I like that one, because that’s a really important tool. As well as difficult conversations because they are always coming up.”
Victoria

“Um, I'd always known about it, but I had a bad attitude. So I didn't care. ((laughter)) So you know when I finally grew up someone says to me —his name is (...)— he says if you sign up for it, I will vouch for you, but I expect you to give it your best. And I'm like, Okay, and just because he asked me, I signed up for it and I got turned down the first time but accepted the second time.”
Community Cultural Wealth

- Aspirational
- Familial
- Linguistic
- Social
What made the difference for the two who succeeded?

Language discrimination?

Gender discrimination?

Access to social capital?
Reflect and respond

Reflect on what you just heard about learner experience.

What does this mean for your work as a practitioner, PD provider, administrator, or policy maker?
Providers’ interpretations of support
Key Questions

What do the perspectives and practices of adult education support providers, including teachers, reveal about representation of race and power when viewed through a CRT lens?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Notes about Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>SE - workforce development CBO</td>
<td>Career Navigator</td>
<td>Refer learners to educational opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivana</td>
<td>SE - workforce development CBO</td>
<td>Career Navigator</td>
<td>Refer learners to educational opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>SW - Taught in an adult education program</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Course supported by workforce development agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>Midwest - multiple employers in workplace</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Taught in the workplace, but employee of an adult education program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Midwest - multiple employers in workplace</td>
<td>HR employee</td>
<td>Administered the course taught by Leslie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>SW - retail organization</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Participated in the course in order to recruit learners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis

- CRT themes (Closson, 2010): endemic racism, interest convergence, color-blindness, and social justice orientation.
- We marked “critical incidents” (Finch, 2010), where participant discourse represented salient tension or alignment with the codes and thus became visible as a possibly racialized representation of power.
- By analyzing critical incidents, we unearthed tensions between individual stated intent and endemic, systemic racism as represented in language used to describe their work.
A. Not identifying an issue
Discourse (or lack of it) that had the potential to perpetuate white supremacy though not named as such.

Codes: endemic racism, color-blindness

Example: “what are you doing that you can't afford a couple hours a day, or, or, you know, half of your Saturday or four hours one evening to, to help further your career?” - Ralph

B. Identifying an issue but not problematizing
An observation showing a willingness to create opportunities, but not questioning the limitations of a course set up with the intention of benefiting the employer

Codes: color blindness, interest convergence

Example: “the location of class in the workplace benefited both the employers and the learners…” - Lynn

C. Identifying an issue and taking action
An observation that reflected a potential to perpetuate white supremacy AND description of means by which they work to mitigate the potential for it.

Codes: social justice orientation

Example: Ivana assisted learners by working to get internet access and laptops
Now you try. Listen to the short scenario drawn from our data and place it along the continuum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Not identifying an issue</th>
<th>B. Identifying an issue but not problematizing</th>
<th>C. Identifying an issue and taking action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse (or lack of it) showing the potential to perpetuate white supremacy though not named as such.</td>
<td>An observation showing the willingness to create opportunities, but not questioning the limitations of a course set up with the intention of benefiting the employer.</td>
<td>An observation showing the potential of course/policy to perpetuate white supremacy AND description of means by which they work to mitigate the potential for it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>endemic racism, color-blindness</td>
<td>color blindness, interest convergence</td>
<td>social justice orientation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Matthew; talked about student jobs, without noticing only BIPOC students had fast food jobs
2. Leslie advocated for changes in curriculum and HR training resources to make them more accessible
3. Carmen noted: workers needed “understanding [of soft skills] how to be, how to be someone that the companies would want to hire…”
4. Matthew allowed students to bring children to class
Column A - “Didn’t identify”

Ralph: didn’t recognize barriers to learning AND comment shows he may be perpetuating problematic views of learners.

“Anyone can find two hours a day to do some learning. Ask yourself, what else are you doing?”

Matthew: didn’t identify racial equity at play in identification of the types of jobs that are available for students who are Black and People of Color.

“Now, many of our other students are working, but they are, because of our socio-economic area, they're, they’re fast food. They're at the low end of the scale on wages and that is a different type of student than what we get with [program name].”... “You get into the fast food and the students (are) fortunate if they've got the same manager at the end of the semester they had at the beginning of semester. Lots of turnover, working very strange shifts. They just struggle much more than, than the sponsored students.”
Lynn described learner and employer convergence; both “benefit” from program

“So we have a jobs committee that we created a couple of years ago that was a response to our tenants struggling to be able to hire enough people to fulfill the open jobs at the airport... So if they’re struggling to recruit. Then we’re going to focus our initiatives on the recruitment side.... [Shows] the opportunity to work at the airport; that we were invested in careers and that we had ample opportunities here to develop and grow a career.” (lines l61-173)

“Convenience is got to be one of the motivating factors because you know this is here” (lines 266-273)
Carmen described convergence showing how through job preparation activities one can be perceived as a valuable potential employee; both employer and employer benefit. Perhaps also characteristic of color-blind approach to education and employability; learners must change, not the system.

“My job is really to help them connect to those resources, help them navigate the challenges of the job search and understanding how to be, how to be someone that the companies would want to hire here in the West…” (83-85)

“I think also understanding certain cultural principles or notions that they might not have been familiar with before. We have actually a lot of training me on soft skills and customer service expectations in us and what employers expect from you as an employee in the US (417 - 423)
Leslie advocated for learners to ensure they truly benefited; created opportunities for learners to direct instructional content choices; worked to scaffold workplace training videos

“...more like just basic customer interactions. And we do some listening, that’s, I mean, this is what they [the students] asked for... Like understanding what their bosses say or what the customers are saying” (lines 37-42)

“... And the videos online... You know, use to make some activities out of or whatever. ... They [HR] said they tried to make it simpler, which I told them about. I was like, are you kidding me? 80% of your employees are immigrants and you have this you know video that so idiomatic English you” (lines 58-65)
Ivana assisted learners by working to get internet access and laptops.

"Yes, technology is a big, big challenge for our clients. It’s a huge challenge"
"I plan to buy laptops for two of these clients. Again, I found very cheap laptops $220 and that program, **the [program] will buy these laptops for them**, and I will enroll them in this basic computer, basic computer skills program."

Matthew lets students come to class with their children.

I’ve had students come to class with their small children. **Some teachers just won’t allow that and it never bothered me. I didn't let it bother me.**
And my students to their credit didn't let it bother them either. ”
Learning to see/Getting others to see

What have you noticed as representations of white supremacy embedded into the field, your program, your practice?

How do we get people to 1) “see” or notice so that they can then 2) take action
What our research shows: What happens if we don’t “See”

- This lack of awareness supported interest convergence (meaning - white people make changes that benefit BIPOC only when it also benefits them) which, if the sole motivator for providing opportunity for economic advancement, can foster systemic racism.

- While white support providers reflected on themselves and their experiences, and sought to connect to the lives of the adults with whom they work, they tended to be color-blind and missed how their experience differed from that of the Black or People of Color learners.
“attempts to improve literacy outcomes by continuing to focus on learner or classroom-level factors will necessarily have a limited impact. If our goal is to improve literacy levels at the societal level, the nature and functioning of the ABE system itself needs to be evaluated, rather than the efforts of individual learners and their teachers.” - Eric Jacobson, 2020