

Not Another All White Study: Challenging Color-Evasiveness Ideology in Disability Scholarship (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Color-evasive ideology within disability higher education research is a pressing issue. The lack of naming and critiquing Whiteness in higher education disability research is a frequent challenge that remains the status quo despite its deleterious effects on disability scholarship, practice, and education. Whitecentric disability research paints an unauthentic picture of who has access and who is thriving. There is a lack of understanding of racialized structural barriers, and in some cases, cultural deprivation that impacts disabled Students of Color from rising to their fullest potential. This scholarly paper uses Disability Critical Race Theory to interrogate color-evasiveness within disability research and practice. This paper provides a brief overview of the relevant literature, addresses the problems of the default centering of whiteness in disability research, and offers suggestions in creating inclusive solutions in disability practice and scholarship. The perpetual centering of Whiteness in higher education disability research and practice is an urgent matter requiring reform.

Keywords: race, DisCrit, intersectionality, disrupting whiteness

I really wanted more racial diversity in my study, but no People of Color volunteered.

I just live in a place where there aren't many People of Color, so this was a limitation for my study.

A White hearing male researcher who focuses on Black Deaf communities was asked why he does this type of research, "If I don't do it, who will?"

A pressing issue in disability higher education is the perpetual centering of Whiteness. The statements above are examples of comments we, two Black scholars with disabilities, have heard from colleagues at conferences, written in manuscripts we have reviewed, and questions we have seen disabled People of Color ask White researchers. The lack of naming, acknowledging and critiquing Whiteness in higher education disability research is a challenge that has been centered as normal and is either unchallenged in meaningful ways or critiques are ignored. "When it comes to disability, there is a tendency to isolate the identity and oppression, and not fully problematize

or understand the complexities of an intersectional lived experience" (Peña, Stapleton, & Schaffer, 2016, p. 90). This type of research paints an unauthentic picture of who has access and who is thriving within higher education. There is a lack of understanding of racialized structural barriers that impact disabled Students of Color from rising to their fullest potential. Using Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), we dive deeper into this issue with the guidance of the following questions: (a) What problems do color-evasiveness in higher education disability scholarship pose for students and practitioners? (b) How might, DisCrit assist us in finding solutions to those problems? Moving forward, this piece will summarize relevant literature, identify the problems and potential solutions, and end with implications for practice.

Summary of Relevant Literature

To critique Whiteness within disability research is to challenge the color-blind ideology or more appropriately the color-evasiveness ideology. We are trying to problematize the verbiage, color-blind, and the concept

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itself within disability research. Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison (2017) challenged us to rethink how we understand and name the lack of acknowledgment of race within disability research stating:

The racial ideology of denying the significance of race should not be equated with blindness because it is an inadequate descriptor. Color-blindness, as a racial ideology, conflates lack of eyesight with lack of knowing. By naming this racial ideology as color-evasiveness, we demonstrate the social construction of race and ability while simultaneously confronting the social and material consequences of racism and ableism. (p. 154)

Color-evasiveness “resists positioning [disabled people] as problematic as it does not partake in dis/ability as a metaphor for undesired,” unknowing, or disadvantaged (Annamma et al., 2017, p. 153). Thus, this language is more appropriate to addressing the real issue. We define color-evasiveness as a racist ideology rooted in White supremacy to avoid accountability, acknowledgment, and identifying historical and continuous race-based discrimination while instantaneously allowing race neutral justifications, laws, policies, and beliefs to persist as normal. To more fully understand our role in eradicating color-evasive practices and elevating equity inclusive of disabled Students of Color, it is first important that we understand DisCrit and the perspectives of other scholars and disability activists.

What is DisCrit?

Disability Critical Race theory (DisCrit) is a theoretical framework that integrates Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS) (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2016). CRT centralizes, recognizes, and problematizes the complicated history of discrimination as a result of the construction of race, the coupling of that construction with hierarchical/systematic and oppressive linkages, and differential access to power of non-dominant racial and ethnic groups (Taylor, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009). DS, although, has a lot in common with CRT (e.g., challenging power and systemic oppression); centralizes the elusive constructions of ability related to bodies; problematizes notions of *normal*; and explicates inequity, marginalization, and mistreatment for individuals with the existence of traits outside of *the norm* (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

DisCrit combines these multiple ways of understanding the world to consider how the imbalances of power related to race/ethnicity and ability—including other marginalized identities, fosters institutionalized

discrimination (Annamma et al., 2016). This theory forces us to dwell in the messiness of lived experiences. The notion of what disability and race means changes depending on the social and cultural context of any given moment; thus, rendering the concept of disability and race both real and socially constructed at the same time (Annamma et al., 2016). The following are the DisCrit tenets used as tools to critique current societal structures (e.g., education, workplaces, and prison systems) as it relates to racialized people with disabilities:

- **Tenet One**—DisCrit “focuses on the ways racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.”
- **Tenet Two**—DisCrit “values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality and so on.”
- **Tenet Three**—DisCrit “emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.”
- **Tenet Four**—DisCrit “privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.”
- **Tenet Five**—DisCrit “considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.”
- **Tenet Six**—DisCrit “recognizes Whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens.”
- **Tenet Seven**—DisCrit “requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.” (p. 19)

DisCrit is a lens to help scholars and practitioners to disrupt the deleterious effects of color-evasive ideologies, to question the accuracy of history, to unpack the compounding impact of racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression, and support the importance of real action for transformative change within higher education and disability scholarship (Annamma et al., 2016, 2017). This is the lens that guides our critique.

What Do Others Think?

We are not the first to push back against color-evasive ideologies in disability scholarship, education, rhetoric, and practice. In Gillborn’s (2015)

scholarship on race, class, and disability in education, he stated, “In the academy we are often told that we are being too crude and simplistic...any attempt to place race and racism on the agenda, let alone at the center of debate, is deeply unpopular” (p. 277). This push back from the academy is countered by the real lived experiences of disabled Activists of Color such as Keith Jones, Patricia Berne, Leroy Moore, and organizations such as Sins Invalid. Through blogging and the arts, disability activists challenge us to recognize that individuals with disabilities “will be liberated as whole beings- as disabled, as queer, as brown, as black, as gender non-conforming, as trans, as women, as men, as non-binary gendered” (Sin Invalid, 2019, para. 3), which centers a more inclusive understanding of disabled lives. Pearson’s (2010) autobiography as “a hard of hearing, middle-class, female, Korean adoptee” further challenged us “to address disability through the conceptual lens of intersectionality and interlocking factors of normalcy” (p. 342). Her work urged us to critique how we use intersectionality to explore other social identities (e.g., race and gender) but fall short when interrogating or working with individuals with disabilities.

Scholars (e.g., Cooc, 2019, Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Stapleton, 2017) have come at this issue from many angles as it relates to education to address areas that are under explored because of a perpetual focus on Whiteness. García-Fernández’s (2014) work on the limitations of bilingual and bicultural education for Latinx and other Deaf Students of Color highlighted the ways that binary, White and Deaf only, approaches limit access to language and cultural identity development support for Deaf Students of Color. Annamma’s (2017) work uses DisCrit to hone in on the criminalization of Students of Color with disabilities and the impact that has on creating a school to prison pipeline, ultimately impacting access to higher education.

Scholars and research are not the only places that issues of race consciousness have been raised. In the summer of 2016, on the heels of multiple unarmed Black individuals being killed by police, Philando Castile, a Black unarmed man, was shot by a police officer in his car with his girlfriend and child watching; and the devastating loss of queer and mostly Latinx queer lives at the Pulse Orlando massacre; the 2016 AHEAD conference started with a commitment to diversity to the membership that can still be found on the main website (<https://www.ahead.org/about-ahead/diversity-inclusion>). Among many recommendations AHEAD (2016) stated:

Interrupt discrimination, marginalization, and stereotyping of minority communities, including

publicly challenging racism and injustice against people of color. Take risks. It is scary, difficult, and may bring up feelings of inadequacy or fear of making mistakes, but ultimately it is the only ethical response....Learn as much as you can about power and privilege, the intersection of race and disability, racism and ableism, and white privilege. (para. 7-8)

Color-evasiveness is complex and multifaceted. We have witnessed, researched, and published the implication of this harmful ideology. Although not perfect, DisCrit offers a framework to question color-evasiveness, unpack the challenges Whiteness raises, and support practitioners in creating more inclusive spaces. We will now highlight a few of the specific problems that manifest from the erasure of race in disability research.

Depiction of the Problem

Color-evasiveness within higher education disability research leads to several issues: (a) the negative impact of limited representation, (b) critiquing and disrupting interchangeably, and (c) challenging old ideology and behavior.

The Negative Impact of Limited Representation

White scholars often research about and with a mostly White disabled student population. This challenge does not mean other intersecting identities such as gender or sexual orientation have not been examined, but the participant sample tends to have few Students of Color within the pool. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity influences the types of questions asked, the stories and experiences we understand, as well as who and what is remembered. The limited racialized diversity within researchers and color-evasiveness within participants has led to an essentialized White understanding of disability. Frederick and Shifrer (2018) defined disability essentialism as “a monolithic experience that is divorced from other forms of oppression” (p. 4), in other words there is one way, one experience, and a single oppression that is experienced by people who are disabled. Research findings are unable to uncover true solutions or offer real recommendations for practitioners because research participant pools continuously underrepresent the racial diversity that exists within disabled communities. Annamma et al. (2017) stated, “In the context of white supremacy, actively avoiding talking about race is a form of power” (p. 155). Perpetuating a White essentialist understanding of disability consciously or subconsciously through passive behavior supports White supremacy ideology.

Critiquing and Disrupting Interchangeably

Color-evasiveness ideology permits racialized and disabled experiences to be used interchangeably without critiquing how each community has different historical lineages, different relationships to larger U.S. systems, and different civil right movements of resistance. People of Color can be ableist and disabled people can be racist. We can acknowledge the connections of how power and oppression play out within both marginalized communities, but we have to be careful to not make the struggles one in the same. Fredrick and Shifrer (2018) supported this by saying, “the ‘minority model’ framework of disability rights has been racialized in ways that center the experiences of white, middle-class disabled Americans, even as this framework leans heavily upon analogic work likening ableism to racial oppression” (p. 2). When you blend the identities, often researchers and consumers of research do not explore how the identities influence each other positively and negatively and how multiple identities can change one’s lived experiences as a disabled Person of Color (Annamma et al., 2016).

Challenging Old Ideology and Behavior

Lastly, color-evasiveness has made it okay to perpetually name inadequate racial and ethnic diversity within research as a limitation but ultimately not address the bigger issue. It is not an unavoidable constraint in which we must all tolerate. The goal is to use data and research-based findings, recommendations, and practices to improve the experiences and lives of people with disabilities across our campuses. When we do not disrupt Whiteness in higher education disability research, our scholarship creates a gap in the literature that misses important aspects of complexity and need (Peña et al., 2016). These gaps can drastically impact Students of Color with disabilities’ educational experiences, opportunities, struggles, and successes throughout the educational pipeline. In addition, these gaps also do not allow practitioners who work with Disabled Students of Color to have access to the latest data.

Solutions: Disrupting Whiteness in Disability Research

It is not enough to discuss the problem; we must get active. Although, “some activities traditionally thought of as activism (e.g., marches, sit-ins, and some forms of civil disobedience) may be based on ableist norms” (Annamma et al., 2016, p. 26); DisCrit encourages us to be creative when fighting for real change. Using DisCrit, we offer these suggestions of disruption as potential starting places to *a process* in which we hope to ignite conversations, new research

approaches, and greater collaboration between scholars, practitioners, and students.

Let’s Get Uncomfortable and Curious

“We have to stretch ourselves in ways that can feel inconvenient and uncomfortable and ask ourselves hard questions about both our beliefs and our everyday actions, knowing that all of us harbor bias, prejudice, and racism,” (para. 21) said Shanell Matthews in her 2017 op-ed in *Public Seminar* where she argues for a spirit of curiosity in order to end anti-Blackness ideology, behavior, and policies. We must first ask questions about what is happening and how we as scholars and practitioners are participating in the problem of Whiteness within disability higher education research. Questions that we might start asking each other are: Where are the voices of Scholars of Color in disability work? Who gets valued as knowledge creators? When is it more ethical to pause a study that lacks diverse participants than to actively participate in color-evasiveness? What attracts or distracts Disabled Students and Communities of Colors from taking part in scholarly endeavors? How is this problem influenced by historical discrimination against Communities of Color and what will it take to heal and build new relationships? These questions must be addressed within community. A spirit of curiosity “allows us to identify where and how we’ve been misinformed about one another, who is responsible for that misinformation, and what their motives are” (Matthews, 2017, para. 4). DisCrit encourages us to look at our history for answers and to do the hard self-work to acknowledge that “traditional approaches,” which were/are often code for White ways of being are not working. It is time to recognize the role socialization of race and ethnicity has and how that socialization and bias impacts scholarly work, informs services and support, and ultimately impacts students.

Action: Interrupting Disability Scholarship as Usual

DisCrit requires that our questions be followed by activism. We must name and interrupt Whiteness within our scholarship. The act of interrupting means to break or stop the continuous progress of some type of action, speech, or behavior. Pema Chodron (2002) once said, “Remember that this [interrupting] is not something we do just once or twice. Interrupting our destructive habits and awakening our heart is the work of a lifetime” (p. 46). An act of interrupting is acknowledging how Whiteness plays out in disabled students lives including their experiences within the educational pipeline and the ways in which Students of Color are often over diagnosed, misdiagnosed, and

under diagnosed (Sommo & Chaskes, 2013). Naming when one's disability research is only focusing on White participants is another way to disrupt Whiteness. This is essential because it allows the reader to not consciously overgeneralize and to expand on disability scholarship in new and important ways that might have been missed if Whiteness had not been normalized as *the disabled experience*.

It is important to intentionally apply theories and frameworks that challenge and disrupt Whiteness and refrain from using or ignoring problematic color-evasive theories. For example, Critical Deaf Theory (Deaf Crit) was created from Critical Race Theory (CRT), but the theory does not include a racialized lens or analysis. The concept of racism was replaced with audism and People of Colors' experiences were replaced with Deaf experiences (Gertz, 2003). By swapping race with ability, we ignore Deaf Students of Color and the fact that they are racialized and a linguistic minority. However, DisCrit, centers race and ability from a systemic perspective. Our theories and frameworks can serve as tools for academic activism or in other words, theories and frameworks matter in the development and outcome of our research and in shifting inequitable scholarship and practice.

Expand Networks and Seek New Collaborators

In order to move beyond White-centered research, we must be intentional about where we solicit participants and collaborations (i.e., campus and community organizations and minority serving institutions). We can seek out and build reciprocal and intentional relationships outside of our normal collaborations, including the HBCU Disability Consortium (<http://www.blackdisabledandproud.org/>) and special interests groups within the Association of Higher Education and Disability (<https://www.ahead.org/>) such as the Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Disability group. Matthews (2017) said, "Curiosity requires a radical imagination" (para. 3), and we must think outside the confines of the academy and professional associations in order to build new and more racially diverse partnerships. We must start to build respectful and reciprocal relationships within disability communities organizations such as the National Coalition for Latinxs with Disabilities (<http://www.latinxdisabilitycoalition.com/>), Krip Hop Nation (<https://kriphopnation.com>), Los Angeles Spoonie Collective (<https://www.facebook.com/LASpoonyCollective/>), Ramp Your Voice (http://rampyourvoice.com/_/), Asian and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities of California (<http://apidisabilities.net>), and many other disability activists, artists, and virtual communities. Our relationships and connections to others becomes our ac-

countability to do better, include more, and seek out diversity in our scholarship and offices.

Implications for Higher Education Practitioners

Interrogating Whiteness within disability work is not only of theoretical importance to scholars, but directly related to how service practitioners have been socialized to understand disability, how they engage with students, and how they begin to interrupt the ways in which they recreate and support Whiteness within their offices. The overarching implication is that DisCrit requires scholars and practitioners to adopt, embrace, and actively practice intersectional activism and resistance. However, we know many disability service offices were and continue to primarily focus on accommodation needs (e.g., facilitating testing centers and notifying faculty of students' needs) and may not have the people power, budget, or time for other services such as programming. However, radical imagination may be the key to navigate these challenges.

DisCrit requires us to do something different, but this new thinking and approach does not need to happen alone. There are a number of professionals (i.e. students, staff, and faculty) on campus to help optimize time, resources, and capacity. Similar to earlier discussions, leveraging cross-departmental collaborations within student affairs and faculty are imperative. Below are several ways to start re-imagining disability services work, space, and community.

Take Hold of Your Agency in Changing the System

Practitioners should hold researchers accountable for more critical racialized scholarship. Research and practice are not separate islands; they inform each other. Practitioners must critically consume research with a racialized lens and build and contribute to a practitioner-scholar feedback loop that allows scholarship to be helpful and aligned in creativity and nimbleness needed to embody DisCrit. Ask researchers questions about who they are hoping to recruit and what their scholarship is about before passing out their flyer or rallying students for them. Encourage Students of Color with disabilities to participate in the research both as participants and future researchers.

We must be mindful of what programs we present and how we present them at conferences and around campus. If programs focus on best practices, we must be critical about contextualizing best practices and ensuring that they are not disability essentialism-laden. We must critique who best practices really serve, so that we actively problematize – and provide solutions, to the assumptions of Whiteness and essentialism in current disability programs. In terms of

challenging the system, often a lack of funds is the problem. Ensure that you use your data to support your decision-making and have an in-house method of evaluating what you share with key stakeholders when requesting additional financial resources. Also, you may have to rethink who is on your team and who has expertise that would not require additional funding to support your programming and training efforts that are noncolor-evasive.

Rethink Who is on Your Team

When we leverage the power of multiple departments and stakeholders in student success, our work towards our goal is more focused and potent. Financial resources increase, integrated expertise that considers the totality of the co-curricular experiences of our students increase, and practitioner knowledge sharing that moves us toward a more intersectional understanding of the identities of racially minoritized students with disabilities also increases. Aligned with this thinking consider *subject expert librarians as another resource to optimize support*. Is there a librarian on your campus that focuses on disabilities? What about a librarian that focuses on cultural studies? You might ask for their help in creating a resource library for faculty, staff, and students at your institutions. They can act as informal archivists to help boost your institutional disability resource library and find material and resources that also represent People of Color with disabilities. In addition, *we can leverage professional organizations like NASPA/ACPA to support the creation of a resource library for the development of Student Affairs professionals* (in addition to our librarians on our campus). Sharing and co-creating between institutional student affairs departments is the big goal here; that can happen best if we leverage our professional organizations—made up of practitioners and scholars from diverse locales/institutions.

Lastly, creating a *Faculty-in-Residence program* is another way to think outside the box particularly working with marginalized fields (e.g., Disability Studies, Ethnic Studies, Queer Studies, Deaf Studies, and Women and Gender Studies). The University of California Irvine's Cross-Culture Center is a great example of this practice. They have a faculty and archivist-in-residence who serve semester long terms, hold office hours in the space, and facilitate one-two workshops or chat sessions with students (M. Ramirez, personal communication, 2019). Utilizing partnerships with faculty who research inclusion, intersectionality, disability, and more can help bring the research to practice alive and ultimately support students with disabilities. These partnerships work to invest faculty in "do-able" inclusion practices related

to their role in student success and show how they might update their pedagogy and mindsets to be less color-evasive and ableist in the classroom. Faculty need pedagogical support, and this could be a win/win. These connections do not necessarily require additional financial resources, but they do require putting energy and effort into building and sustaining relationships across the institution.

Help Build a Diverse Pipeline

It is never too early to engage students in leadership and professional development while exposing them to the ends and outs of how a disability services office works. For example, if your institution has a student affairs program or a program at a nearby institution *consider actively recruiting Student Affairs master's student interns/practicum students to facilitate interdepartmental programming initiatives*. This opportunity would allow them to become experts at adeptness in interdepartmental integration while also allowing them to become knowledgeable about the area of disability services. Their focus might be creating two interdepartmental programs for the year. Furthermore, integrating student interns/practicum Students of Color in these settings would only add greater value and not take away from the already robust capacities of disability services departments.

Second, *build in the space for student leaders—that have the capacity, to support the efforts of disability services offices*. It can be challenging to create student clubs or leadership groups within disability services offices because of the culture of confidentiality, society stigma, and no history or formal structures to socially gather students with disabilities (i.e., cultural centers), but some students really want these types of opportunities. They want to meet other students who are trying to navigate college with a disability. Some students want to be actively involved with the Disability Justice movements. For example, during the 2017 California State University Northridge student protest over the system-wide curriculum changes, students stood in the faculty senate meeting sharing personal narratives of why Ethnic studies courses were important and why the senate should vote to support their efforts. One student walked onto the stage, declared he was a student with autism and how he too supported Ethnic studies, but did not leave the stage before also holding Ethnic studies accountable for their lack of inclusion of disability within their curriculum. He was the only person to make such a statement, but more of our students with disabilities are fully capable of fighting for their education and curriculum that is inclusive be-

yond accommodations. Our students with disabilities particularly our Students of Color can contribute to the efforts of your services while gaining leadership training and opportunities.

Ask Your Students

Lastly, DisCrit illuminates the dilemma of how disability over time and space has been studied, understood, and remembered through the perspectives of White, abled-bodied, neurotypical hearing individuals. Practitioners have the opportunity to shift who creates knowledge and whose knowledge is respected and implemented for change. *Leveraging students' expertise with regards to campus climate, prior programming and experiences, and asking about new initiatives is important for transformative change.* Build informal focus groups to gather feedback *before* programmatic initiatives happen and use student suggestions to shift programming, so it is aligned to serve more diverse students. It is also important to ask students to re-imagine how they might solve problems they frequently encounter. We realize that students have a lot on their plate, and putting the work on marginalized communities to solve their own oppression is sticky and if over used problematic. However, we gather a variety of other marginalized students (e.g., LGBT, Students of Color, Women, and Undocumented students) to create and hold space together and brainstorm solutions to campus challenges. Ultimately, students with disability and particularly those of color's feedback is important AND they give practitioners the best insight about how to serve them before we make another misstep and they become jaded with "another new initiative."

Conclusion

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The charge is eminent to infuse our work with the tenets of DisCrit *and*, without considering our already present institutional resources, this charge can feel overwhelming. When we leverage our resources and push past stagnation to educate ourselves on *how* to work smart—because our students deserve it, we have a fighting chance at truly serving the needs of ALL of our students (including those who have been pervasively marginalized). The tale of student success includes DisCrit operationalization in our work and mindset. Whiteness can no longer be the baseline

measure of success concerning students with disabilities. Students' intersectionality moves us away from the single story. The single story has continued to dis-parage. We can do better than the single story. We *must* do better.

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