

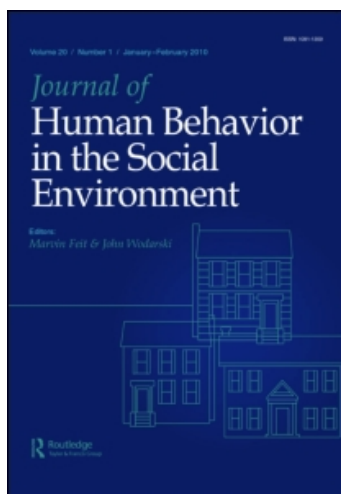
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Sociological Theories of Learning Disabilities: Understanding Racial Disproportionality in Special Education

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Many researchers have applied sociological theory to concepts of physical disability, leading to the “social model” used by disability advocates and activists, but less work has been done to provide a sociological frame for learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities have constituted the fastest-growing special education population in public school districts, particularly students of color. Though the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs is well documented, few efforts have been made to apply sociological theories to expand our understanding of this phenomenon. This article provides an overview of this application to the study of learning disabilities and special education, with particular attention to the disproportionate involvement of minority youth in educational programs for students with disabilities.

KEYWORDS *Racial disproportionality, special education, overrepresentation, sociological theories*

In 2001, more than half of the students in special education were identified as having a specific learning disability, more than any other disability that qualifies youth for such services (Special Education Programs & Westat [SEP-Westat], 2005). Since 1977, after special education categories such as “culturally deprived” were eliminated, learning disabilities have constituted the fastest-growing special education population, particularly for students of color (Ysseldyke, 2001). Many researchers have applied sociological theory

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to concepts of physical disability, leading to the “social model” used by disability advocates and activists (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999). However, less attention has been given to applying sociological theories to learning disabilities, partly limited interest within the disability rights movement (Chappell, Goodley, & Lawthom, 2001; Goodley, 2001; Nunkoosing, 2000).

Though the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs is well documented (Donovan, Cross, & Department of Education, 2002), few sociological theories have been employed to explain the phenomenon (Eitle, 2002). This article provides an overview of the limited research and the application of sociological theory to the study of learning disabilities and special education, especially the disproportionate participation of minority youth in educational programs for students with disabilities. First, social constructionism, interactional theories, institutional theories and structural theories of learning disability and special education are reviewed. These theories are then applied as a conceptual framework for understanding the overrepresentation of youth of color in special education.

METHODS

This review of the sociological literature related to learning disability and special education focuses on studies from 1980 to 2006 written by sociologists, published in sociological journals, or using concepts that have sociological origins. Studies were identified from online searches on CSA Illumina’s Social Sciences databases, a collection of 19 electronic databases of which two focus exclusively on empirical studies in sociology. The search terms included all variants of *sociology*, *theory*, *learning disability/disorder*, *special education*, *minority*, *representation*, and/or *students of color* in different combinations. Additional studies were identified in the reference lists of articles, chapters, and books found through the search process. In total, 33 relevant publications were reviewed for this analysis.

In this article, the term *learning disability* refers to the classifications of educable mental retardation and learning disorders, unless otherwise specified (SEP-Westat, 2005). Students of color are overrepresented in the special education categories related to subjective cognitive and behavioral disabilities such as educable mental retardation, emotional disturbances, and learning disorders (Gelb & Mizokawa, 1986). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the term “special education,” references the programs that serve this population, not programs for those with “objective” or “hard” physical disabilities such as orthopedic, hearing or visual impairments, which only account for approximately 10% of the special education population (SEP-Westat, 2005).

THEORIES OF LEARNING DISABILITY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

The literature on sociological theories of learning disability and special education can be grouped into three dominant discourses: interactional, institutional, and structural. The theory of social constructionism underlies each of these discourses, a conceptual framework most notably articulated by Berger and Luckman (1966) in their treatise, *The Social Construction of Reality*. This analysis begins with an outline the key components of social constructionism that underpin sociological theories of learning disability and special education.

Social Constructionism

Nunkoosing (2000) identifies three aspects of social constructionism that are used in sociological theory and applied to learning disability and special education. They are anti-essentialism, anti-realism, and language as social action. Anti-essentialism rejects the proposition that there is one cause of learning disabilities. For example, it is more than the neurological processes within an individual's brain that makes a person learning-disabled (also known as the medical model of learning disabilities). Instead, an anti-essentialist approach requires the consideration of multiple perspectives and possibilities rather than one objective truth. Similarly, anti-realism posits that there is not one "objective, observable and measurable reality that is external to the individual," such as the measuring of intelligence only by means of one IQ test (Nunkoosing, p. 52). This post-positivistic point of view maintains that people actively construct knowledge based on their experiences and interactions with the world around them. Finally, language as social action refers to the role that words play in the construction of identities and relationships. Embedded within the language of learning *disabilities* and *special* education are notions of difference and otherness.

The three constructs of anti-essentialism, anti-realism, and language as social action reflect interrelated assumptions of social constructionism that appear repeatedly in the sociological literature in relationship to learning disabilities and special education. Social constructionists argue that you cannot have a learning disability on your own (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Goodley, 2001). First, the identity of learning disabilities is not related to internal, cognitive processes but is always in relation to other people. Second, the identification of people with learning disorders and their placement in special education programs both reflect and serve particular interests of individuals, institutions and society (Tomlinson, 1982). Thus, the concept of learning disabilities and the need for special education programs need to be understood within larger historical, political, social, and economic contexts (Carrier, 1986a). The three sociological theories of learning disabilities and special

education will now be described: interactional, institutional, and structural. Each theory relies on social constructionist concepts and assumptions.

Interactional Theories

Interactional theories focus on relationships between individuals and groups, helping to identify bias in referral and assessment that often serve individual and professional interests. Using a medical model, learning disabilities are defined as neurological disorders within the brain of an individual student (Christensen, Gerber, & Everhart, 1986; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Goodley, 2001; Ruiz, 1995). However, given limitations in technology, students are identified based on behaviors that are associated with brain damage, not by any proof of cellular injury. For example, the symptoms required for a diagnosis of a learning disorder are (1) achievement levels that are substantially below that expected given the person's chronological age, measured intelligence and age-appropriate education; and (2) such low achievement significantly interferes with academic success or activities of daily living (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994). For example, to make the diagnosis of a learning disability, it is not necessary to demonstrate that a child has a neurological impairment but only that the child's performance on psychological tests and his or her behavior in educational settings is remotely similar to that of children with neurological disorders (Carrier, 1983).

The symptoms associated with learning disabilities lack both universality and specificity. As a result, research has shown that less than 1% of students identified as having a learning disorder demonstrate clear neurological signs of brain abnormality (Christensen et al., 1986). In fact, some studies of special education populations suggest that many students labeled as having learning disabilities do not meet federal definition guidelines and do not appear to perform significantly differently from other low-achieving students on a battery of psycho-educational tests (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983; Shepard, Smith, & Vojir, 1983; Ysseldyke, 2001). Certain behaviors, rather than neurological functions, seem to inform the identification of learning disabled children. Consequently, the referral of most students for assessment is subjective, based most often on a teacher's or school administrator's judgment of bothersome behavior or some interpretation of a student's lack of achievement in school (Carrier, 1986b; Ysseldyke et al., 1988), not evidence of a natural or organic impairment. More than 73% of the students referred are determined eligible for special education, irrespective of the expertise of the assessor, suggesting the highly questionable accuracy of assessment tools (Ysseldyke, 2001; Ysseldyke, Vanderwood, & Shriner, 1997).

Given this subjectivity, Slee (1997) raises questions about the motivations of school professionals whose decisions contribute to the increasing numbers of students identified as having learning disabilities and placed in

special education. He argues that the immediate beneficiaries are not the young people so identified: Most students who are placed into exclusionary programs do worse, not better, than they did when they were in mainstream classrooms (Glass, 1983). Instead, the beneficiaries are the other students in regular classes that have been disturbed by the student's different needs, the teachers whose job is made less difficult by the student's being removed from their classrooms, and parents who receive fewer complaints about their child's behavior in class. White, middle-class parents in particular benefited from the creation of the category of learning disorders, as it allowed their children to receive extra support in school without the negative stigma and outcomes of having their child placed in special education classes that are designed for students categorized as mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995; Sleeter, 1986). When this category was first created, the classification of children with learning disorders was strongly and positively correlated with socioeconomic status (Gelb & Mizokawa, 1986).

Barton and Tomlinson (1981) argue that the identification of students with learning disabilities and subsequent placement in special education is a form of social control to minimize problem behaviors in mainstream classrooms. Other researchers have documented that teachers and principals refer children for special needs assessment who are causing the biggest problems in the classroom, be it passivity, failure to learn material, or aggressiveness (Ysseldyke, 2001). Children who are less noticeable to teachers but may be even more likely to have a neurological disorder are often not identified (Milofsky, Mongon, & Whelan, 1984). In this way, special education primarily serves social control functions in schools as it legitimizes the removal of "deviant" students from regular classrooms (Barton, 1981).

In addition to the benefits accrued by mainstream teachers when students are labeled as learning-disabled, special education programs also receive more funding as their enrolment of learning disabled students increase (Slee, 1997). Likewise, Tomlinson (1982) argues that the expansion of special education programs over the past 50 years can be viewed as an effort on the part of certain professionals to expand their role, influence, and credibility in society. She finds further evidence of her argument in the constant expansion of categories that make students eligible for special education. This growing population of children with special needs and parents who are concerned for them has also spawned a significant marketplace for creating and selling assessment and intervention tools (Carrier, 1986a). In general, professionals involved in special education or learning disabilities seem to have a conflict of interest as their employment depends on the continuation of a problem that is their stated goal to eliminate. This may unconsciously provide incentives for school psychologists and others to over-identify students as learning disabled and qualified for special education (Tomlinson, 1982).

Institutional Theories

Institutional theory focuses on the identities of institutions and how they shape individual and group behavior. These sociological theories can help to explain the referral, assessment, and intervention decisions made by teachers, school psychologists, and education administrators that are formed by the institutions within which they work (Dudley-Marling, 2004). From this perspective, the institutional needs fulfilled by the identification of children with learning disabilities and their placement in special education programs provide the context for understanding individual interests. Similar to interactional theories, institutional theories provide an alternative to the medical and psychological construction of learning disability that locates the “problem” within the mind of the individual rather than the institution. This approach affectively absolves schools from acknowledging their inability to teach all students and allows them to blame individual students for their lack of achievement (Dudley-Marling, 2004).

Dudley-Marling and Dippo (1995) note that the category of learning disabilities was created to sustain three assumptions of schooling in the United States. First, that compulsory schooling is justifiable, reasonable, and beneficial as it creates opportunity for all Americans. Second, each student comes to school with a unique intellectual endowment, often operationalized as IQ, the potential of which will be realized only through hard work and effort (Dudley-Marling & Dippo). The third assumption is that competition is good and natural because it motivates and prepares students for real life. Although everyone has an individual IQ, personal potential will be realized only through hard work and effort. Given these assumptions, learning disorders explain an anomaly in the system: why IQ and effort do not always lead to school success, an argument used particularly for white middle-class children who come from otherwise “normal” backgrounds (Christensen et al., 1986). Instead of localizing responsibility in the school’s structure or teaching practices, there is a tendency to transfer culpability to the child (Dudley-Marling, 2004).

The medical model of learning disability also functions to sustain beliefs about the role of individual differences in schools. Schools claim to recognize and accommodate difference. Yet special education programs reinforce the idea that there is a “normal” way of learning and behaving with isolated, segregated special education programs within schools that focus on learning coping strategies (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995). Instead of seeing learning disabilities as a potential mismatch between the curriculum or instructional strategies and the student’s interests or learning styles, the different needs of students are characterized as disabilities. In fact, the quality of teaching does matter in the identification of learning-disabled children; when instruction is poor, more students are identified as learning-disabled, but if those same students are placed in classrooms with better teachers who focus their

instruction on problem areas, these students are able to succeed (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995; Ysseldyke, 2001).

Institutional theory suggests that public schools ignore this evidence because they need to maintain their performance ratings and find it easier to isolate learners with different needs than to systematically improve instruction for all students. In addition to the quality of teaching, Carrier (1986b) and Barton (1981) found that the following institutional factors influenced the identification of learning disabilities in the student population: (1) budgetary constraints, (2) professional interests and resources, (3) priorities of administrators and, (4) the availability of special provision and services. In addition, when schools are accountable to high-stakes tests and referral and enrollment rates for special education increases (Ysseldyke, 2001). As the consequences of student failure increase for schools, the identification of students with learning disabilities can transfer “the blame [from schools] to students through medicalizing and objectifying discourses while reducing the uncertainty of student disability by containing it through exclusionary practices” (Skirtic, 2005).

Structural Theories

Structural theories focus on the macro-forces that shape the behavior of organizations and institutions. These sociological theories help to illustrate how dominant societal values and historical trends inform the nature of education and the behavior of social actors within schools. This viewpoint stresses that special education serves to reproduce larger social inequalities. As Dudley-Marling (2004) notes,

From this perspective, learning and learning problems, including the identity of “having LD,” do not reside in people’s heads as much as in the complex of social interactions performed in a place called school that is itself situated in a broader social, political and cultural context (p. 483).

Similar to the interactional and institutional theories, structural theories provide an alternative view of learning disabilities as individual organic disorders and suggest that society should be the unit of concern, not individual needs or institutional demands, that are reflections of a stratified and unequal society (Carrier, 1986b). These theories help to explain how the categorization of children as learning-disabled can emerge from the social and economic forces of capitalism (Carrier, 1986a; Chappell et al., 2001; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Skirtic, 2005; Sleeter, 1986).

One structural view of learning disabilities is the degree to which capitalistic ideals of individual merit reproduce larger social inequalities. The ways in which schools function can instill and reinforce this value on individualism

(Dudley-Marling, 2004). If personal effort is all that matters, student failure must be the responsibility of those individual children, not the school and its values. Structural theories are based on the idea that individualism is actually a social construct mediated by the behaviors of dominant groups in which their ways of learning are seen as normal and those that differ are viewed as abnormal or disordered. From this point of view, the designation or label of learning disabled helps to explain why the efforts of students from less powerful groups do not lead to academic success. This process helps to maintain the ideology of meritocracy by equating school failure with individual disability (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995).

Another structural theory applied to learning disabilities suggests that labeling students helps schools to sort students for future roles in the labor market (Skirtic, 2005). Before mass schooling, this kind of sorting occurred prior to school enrollment, as those who fulfilled low-skill positions worked to support their families and did not attend. Only with compulsory public education did schools need to develop internal sorting mechanisms that prepared students for different labor market roles and allocated different resources accordingly (Carrier, 1986b). At a minimum, schools have always been organized to prepare students to be good workers who arrive on time, respect authority, follow directions, and complete tasks efficiently (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995). Structural theorists postulate that special education was created early on to manage those with severe impairments that made them economically problematic as undisciplined and uncompetitive workers (Chappell et al., 2001).

In the late 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, public pressure mounted for schools to produce students that could compete internationally and respond to post-industrial labor needs. Industry and government increasingly needed people who could “keep and understand increasingly complex records, pursue advanced professional training and follow written directions” (Sleeter, 1986). The federal government responded by making promotion requirements more rigorous, raising the norms for testing, introducing uniform standards, and grouping students by ability. However, a significant number of children could not meet the new expectations. Unlike previous generations of students with special needs, these students included members of dominant groups in terms of race, class, and political power.

Until the 1960s, special education had four categories: slow learners, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and culturally deprived. Structural theorists argue that the classification of learning-disordered arose in the sixties as a response to a growing number of white, middle-class students who were not meeting the more rigorous standards schools implemented in response political and economic demands for a more highly skilled labor force. As previously mentioned, the label of the learning-disordered did not have the same stigma of other special education classifications and allowed such students to stay on track for becoming professionals. From

this perspective, the creation of the learning-disordered category allowed schools to continue to “mirror the stratified and unequal structure of the market economy” (Skirtic, 2005) while at the same time legitimizing the social order. The focus on a newly discovered “organic” impairment masked the social forces and relations at work. Thus, despite the best intentions of individual psychologists and special educators, the concept of learning disorders only aided in the role that special education plays in reproducing inequality (Carrier, 1986b).

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how interactional, institutional, and structural sociological theories explain the placement of learning-disabled students by employing social constructionist concepts and assumptions at multiple levels of analysis. Interactional theories posit that referral and assessment for learning disabilities serves individual interests and supports social control. Institutional theories explain placement in special education as a tool to mask school failure and maintains the ideology of schooling. Finally, structural theories suggest that the identification of students as learning-disabled reflects broader social inequality and stratified expectations of students’ future roles in the labor market. The next section applies these theories to the overrepresentation of youth of color in special education.

UNDERSTANDING THE OVERREPRESENTATION OF YOUTH OF COLOR IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

These interactional, institutional, and structural theories of sociology applied to learning disability and special education provide a useful conceptual framework for understanding the overrepresentation of youth of color who have been identified as having special needs. The remainder of this analysis focuses on this framework, which reflects the assumption that race and racism are socially constructed.

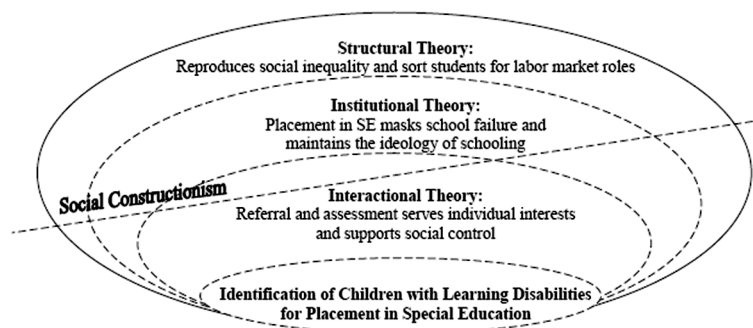


FIGURE 1 Sociological theories of learning disabilities.

Stereotyping and Bias in Individual Referral and Assessment Decisions

Interactional theories can help to explain racial stereotyping and cultural biases in the referral and assessment processes, resulting in the disproportionate number of children of color in special education for learning disabilities (Argulewicz, 1983). As research suggests, most children are referred for assessment based on subjective evaluations of non-normative or problematic behavior in class. For example, teachers tend to view children of color, particularly those who are of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as more challenging and aggressive (Milofsky et al., 1984). This perspective is bolstered by the consistent finding that most teachers prefer students who behave in ways that reflect the values, attitudes, and expressive patterns of dominant racial and class groups (Carrier, 1983). In addition, studies have demonstrated that resistant behaviors of students result from a mismatch between the curriculum and their background. If there is racial or class bias in the content, low-income students of color may have difficulty connecting with the material. Such a disengagement can lead to student behaviors that teachers interpret as problematic (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995).

Once a child is referred, similar biases affect the assessment process. Psychological assessment tools in general, and the IQ test in particular, have long been criticized for being culturally biased in favor of white, native-English-speaking, upper- and middle-class individuals (De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Diniz, 1999; Harry & Klingner, 2006). For example, Schmid (2001) notes that “teachers and administrators often confuse the consequences of the lack of English proficiency with underachievement, learning difficulties, lack of attention in class, and language disorders,” when in fact bilingualism can be an educational asset (Schmid, 2001). Carrier (1983) attributes the responses of teachers and psychologists to children of color to the different socialization processes of different cultures that reflect unique communication styles and language. Education professionals who do not share the same background as their students may view a child’s behavior as “maladaptive” instead of simply different. Interactional theories point to these cross-cultural misperceptions and stereotypes as the primary force behind minority student overrepresentation in special education programs.

Special Education as a Structure for Managing Diversity and Difference

In contrast to interactional theories, institutional theories point to the mechanisms that schools use to manage difference as the cause of racial disparities in special education. In the late 1960s, school districts across the country received court orders to integrate their schools. Skirtic (2005) argues, “student disability and special education are institutional categories created” in

response to “a dramatic increase in student diversity and bureaucratization of schools” (p. 149). At that time, when students of color were referred for assessment, they were identified as culturally deprived, slow learner, or mentally retarded, essentially re-segregating minority youth within schools. However, in response to the civil rights movement, the first two categories of cultural deprivation and slow learner were eliminated, and the IQ threshold for mental retardation was decreased as an attempt to create greater educational equity for children of color. Schools could no longer make reference to a child’s background as part of the official criteria for a diagnosis of learning disabled (Sleeter, 1986).

Simultaneously, schools were also facing increasing diversity as a result of court-ordered de-segregation (Eitle, 2002). Institutional theorists contend that the legislative changes to special education categories help schools manage the diversity and difference of student populations by labeling minority students as learning-disabled. The children once identified as mentally retarded or culturally deprived were simply reclassified as having a learning disorder (Sleeter, 1986). Research has demonstrated that the presence of a court order for integration in mixed race districts (less than 57% minority) is positively correlated with the overrepresentation of students of color in special education (Eitle). Furthermore, as individual schools become more integrated, they also are more likely to reflect racial disproportionality in their special education programs (Eitle). This integration process masks the inability of public schools to serve students of color equitably and instead locates the problem in the behaviors of individual children.

Racial Competition and the use of Special Education to Produce Racial Inequality

Sociological theorists argue that the disproportionate number of students of color in special education programs is a function of racial competition (Eitle, 2002). This theory argues that as the numbers of racial minorities grow, there is more competition for resources such as jobs and education, which leads to the use of racism to create an advantage for white communities. In the context of learning disabilities and special education, as schools become more integrated, there is more competition for the educational resources (the best teachers, curriculum, and materials), and students from disadvantaged groups are more likely to be assigned to special education classes using exclusionary and stigmatizing labels. These structural theorists argue that the sorting process that schools use to allocate their resources is as much about perpetuating racial hierarchy as it is about class dynamics (De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Eitle).

For example, Eitle (2002) demonstrated that as districts become more segregated, special education programs reflect less racial disproportionality. She theorizes that the more minority presence increases, the more likely it is that white parents are no longer invested in the school district (i.e., white

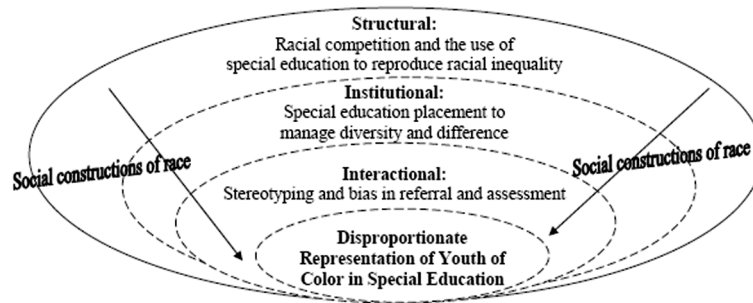


FIGURE 2 Understanding disproportionality in special education.

flight) and are not competing for resources, so the need to segregate within schools through special education placement is less necessary. She argues that “parents, teachers, counselors and other school personnel are embedded in localities that shape their racial ideologies, beliefs about intelligence, ability to act in a discriminatory way, and opportunity to activate cultural and social resources” (p. 599).

Racism, and related social constructions of race, influence these structural, institutional, and interactional behaviors, which, like capitalism, serve dominant group interests. From this point of view, the identification of children with learning disabilities and subsequent placement in special education is not a humanitarian act of benevolence toward students of color. Rather, this process serves to reproduce social inequality and maintain the status quo.

Figure 2 illustrates how interactional, institutional, and structural sociological theories help us understand the overrepresentation of students of color in special education. Structural theories suggest that racial competition leads to the use of special education as a tool of segregation that reproduces racial inequality. Institutional theories explain that the overrepresentation of youth of color in special education is a result of schools’ attempts to manage diversity and difference. Interactional theories point to stereotyping and bias in referral and assessment as a significant contributor to the disproportionate numbers of students of color who are identified as learning disabled.

CONCLUSION

The discipline of sociology provides an important lens for understanding learning disabilities, special education, and related racial disproportionalities. Renewed sociological inquiry is necessary to help balance the medical and psychological views of learning disabilities that dominate public discourse. In the context of human behavior and the social environment, interactional theories can inform our understanding of human behavior with respect to

learning disabilities and special education by highlighting the individual decisions, interests, and biases that lead to the identification of students as learning-disabled. Institutional and structural perspectives can guide our analysis of the social environment with attention to the larger forces and systemic pressures that influence individual behavior and shape such social phenomena as racial disproportionality.

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