



**What Is Deficit Thinking? An Analysis of
Conceptualizations of Deficit Thinking
and Implications for Scholarly Research**

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Introduction

Although deficit thinking has existed for well over a century (Menchaca, 1997), scholarly analyses of it have become increasingly common over the last two decades. In general, deficit thinking¹ holds students from historically oppressed populations responsible for the challenges and inequalities that they face (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Haggis, 2006; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 1997, 2010; Weiner, 2003). Overall, these perspectives serve as tools that maintain hegemonic systems and, in doing so, fail to place accountability with oppressive structures, policies, and practices within educational settings.

Over the last decade, scholars have utilized the concept of deficit thinking in at least three different ways, contributing to growing confusion and misinterpretation within this literature. First, the vast majority of scholars engaging deficit thinking in their work define it as a blame the victim way of thinking that attribute students' failures to their individual, family, or community traits, and utilize this definition throughout their analyses (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Haggis, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 1997, 2010; Weiner, 2003). Second, a handful of researchers cite similar definitions of deficit thinking and highlight the ways in which these views blame the victim but then go on to suggest that deficit thinking might be sufficiently characterized by discussion of "unfavorable conditions," the existence of "environmental" challenges, or racial disparities in educational outcomes (Banks, 2014; Poon et al., 2016). Finally, several researchers apply the concept of deficit thinking in their analyses without explicitly defining it (Cooper, Cooper, & Baker, 2016; Corcoran, 2015; Hardy

1. Deficit thinking has been discussed using several different terms, including deficit assumptions (Thomas, 2010), deficit discourse (Lawrence, 2008; Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012), deficit framing or deficit framework (Zeidler, 2016), deficit ideology (Gorski, 2008, 2011, 2016; Sleeter, 2004), and deficit model (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012; Sondermeyer, van den Berg, & Brown, 2005; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995), deficit paradigm (Ford, 2014; Moletsane, 2012; Vass, 2012), deficit theory (Collins, 1988; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2008; Knight, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2007), deficit thinking (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Knight, 2002; Licona, 2013; McKay & Devlin, 2016; O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2016; Pérez, Ashlee, Do, Karikari, & Sim, 2017; Valencia, 1997), and some combination of two or more of the aforementioned terms (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Sharma, 2018). We use the term deficit thinking in our discussion but include literature utilizing all of these terms in our analysis.

& Woodcock, 2015; Humphries, 2013).

Given these disparate applications, it might be difficult to ascertain what actually constitutes deficit thinking in scholarly circles. For example, we have heard stories about emerging scholars' research being rejected from journals because it represents deficit thinking, even when their work appears to be anti-deficit in nature. We have also mentored emerging scholars who experience angst from fear that their work might be perceived as promoting deficit thinking. Moreover, we have mentored doctoral students who were, in fact, engaging in deficit thinking and ultimately worked to shift their dissertation to be anti-deficit. In any of these examples, scholars might experience confusion about what represents deficit thinking and the best way to move their research forward using anti-deficit approaches.

Much remains to be learned about deficit thinking, and it is likely that analyses in this area will increase in the coming decades as scholars aspire to produce more critical research. For these reasons, scholars should be able to identify key elements of deficit thinking and know how to analyze, critique, and apply anti-deficit framing accurately and constructively. Doing so would not only maximize appropriate application of anti-deficit frames but also help readers understand the difference between using deficit lenses and critiquing deficit thinking for the purposes of producing critical research. Furthermore, learning about and challenging deficit thinking to inform critical research can minimize the likelihood that such concepts would be misunderstood in ways that devalue equity-oriented research. This research brief is designed to clarify key elements of and offer implications for future scholarly research on deficit thinking.

Purpose and Method

We conducted a review of literature that focuses analysis primarily on the concept of deficit thinking. Our focus was not on the larger body of literature that mentions deficit thinking. Rather, our intent was to understand how scholars who are fully engaging these concepts in their work conceptualize and define them. Although scholars have previously outlined characteristics of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997), our primary concern was the key elements of deficit thinking that manifest in critiques of it. These include,

but are not limited to, critiques of how discourses related to achievement gaps, students of color, people in poverty, and students in special education perpetuate deficit ways of thinking (Banks, 2014; Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Chambers & Spikes, 2016; Gorski, 2016).

We utilized Google Scholar to gather literature for our analysis. We limited the inclusion of literature to papers that mentioned “deficit,” as well as key terms related to educational outcomes (i.e., education, success, achievement, attainment, or academic performance), in their titles. The search generated 44 publications that had been published over the last 20 years. It is important to note that, although much of this literature was produced in the field of education, the concept of deficit thinking and its impact transcend the boundaries of education systems, and the current discussion may be relevant and applicable to understanding other systems within public and private spheres of society.

Critical Elements of Deficit Thinking

Before presenting the findings of our analysis, it is important to note that existing literature utilizes various terms to describe deficit thinking (e.g., deficit framing, deficit paradigm, deficit perspective) and often appears to use these concepts interchangeably. We include research using this diverse range of terms in our analysis.

Our analysis resulted in four central themes that illustrate how deficit thinking is conceptualized and defined in existing research: a blame the victim orientation, a grounding in larger complex systems of oppression, a pervasive and often implicit nature, and effects that reinforce hegemonic systems. Research suggests that these four interdependent themes represent critical aspects of the conceptualization of deficit thinking. None of these elements alone are comprehensive enough to constitute deficit thinking; rather, all four aspects of deficit thinking are important for understanding its nature and impact.

A Blame the Victim Orientation

Scholars consistently agree that deficit thinking perpetuates a blame the

victim orientation toward communities that face inequalities in society (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Ford, 2014; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Haggis, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 1997, 2010; Weiner, 2003). Scholars have noted that deficit thinking has evolved from primarily perpetuating perspectives that individuals' traits are the source of their own failures to implying that the cultures (e.g., communities and families) from which people come are responsible for the challenges that they face (Knight, 2002). However, deficit thinking can manifest in either or both of these assumptions (Aikman et al., 2016; Ford, 2014; Sleeter, 2004; Valencia, 1997, 2010). Although literature indicates that deficit thinking perpetuates beliefs that students' environments are responsible for their failures, it is important to acknowledge that most of this research refers to the environment within students' communities and families, which should not be confused or conflated with environments that are primarily perpetuated within dominant power systems (e.g., schools and college campuses). Perspectives that highlight deficiencies or problems in institutional environments, for example, can be instrumental in shifting the blame from individuals to systemic forces and are often anti-deficit in nature.

Deficit thinking ignores systemic influences that shape disparities in social and educational outcomes (Chambers & Spikes, 2016; Ford, 2014; Valencia, 1997, 2010). In doing so, it leaves the focus on individual and cultural "deficiencies" intact while simultaneously disregarding the powerful forces that produce and perpetuate challenges for historically oppressed populations. In some cases, deficit thinking even suggests and reinforces the notion that dominant structures are the primary solution to the aforementioned social inequalities. For example, deficit thinking perpetuates dominant narratives that education lifts people out of poverty and is the solution to addressing inequalities (Aikman et al., 2016) while ignoring the role that educational systems also play in reinforcing social inequities.

A Symptom of Larger Systemic Oppression

Scholars who write about deficit thinking generally agree that these perspectives are a symptom of larger historical and sociopolitical contexts and ideologies (Gorski, 2011). Deficit thinking is historically grounded in dominant classist and racist ideologies that frame oppressed people as deficient (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Menchaca, 1997). Indeed, evidence of deficit thinking can be traced back centuries. In the mid-1700s, misbeliefs that enslaved Africans were mentally deficient and unable to learn fueled compulsory ignorance laws that imposed heavy

finer on anyone caught teaching them to write or using them as scribes (Ryan, 1971). In addition, school segregation policies that existed until the mid-1900s were founded on the misconceptions that racially minoritized populations were intellectually inferior and that racial mixing would contaminate White education (Menchaca & Valencia, 1990).

In addition to having roots in classist and racist ideologies, deficit thinking is anchored in meritocracy and colorblindness. Indeed, deficit thinking is inextricably intertwined with meritocratic ideologies, which suggest that everyone has an equal chance to succeed within existing sociopolitical structures. Moreover, deficit frames intersect with colorblind ideologies, which misleadingly imply that systemic racism is not a major cause of racial inequities and does not shape the experiences and outcomes of racial groups throughout society. It is important to note that, since the 1980s, deficit thinking has converged with meritocracy and colorblindness to fuel the proliferation of high-stakes testing cultures in education, which intensify the focus on students' deficiencies and fixing them at the expense of addressing larger structural inequities (Valencia & Guadarrama, 1996).

A Pervasive and Implicit Nature

Scholars highlight at least two commonalities across the ways in which deficit thinking manifests: it is pervasive and often implicit. Regarding the former, scholarship suggests that deficit thinking permeates social and educational systems, including culture and language, policies and practices, and individual cognitive structures and worldviews. For example, scholars highlight how deficit views are infused into policy debates (Aikman et al., 2016; Knight, 2002; Smit, 2012) and deeply embedded in educational institutions (Sleeter, 2004; Weiner, 2003).

Scholars also describe how deficit thinking becomes implicit in taken-for-granted cultural values, assumptions, and language that shape social and educational discourse, policy, and practice. Scholars have argued that deficit thinking can be reinforced by labels that imply individual deficiencies (Aikman et al., 2016). For example, conversations about students who are at risk imply that they are likely to fail (Aikman et al., 2016), and discourse around grit suggests that students' individual deficiency (i.e., lack of grit) is responsible for the challenges that they experience in education (Gorski, 2016; Kundu, 2014). However, it is also important

to note that such terms can be couched in larger anti-deficit narratives (e.g., discussions of how minoritized students develop grit as a result of navigating systemic racism). Thus, the use of a single word does not automatically make discourse inherently and completely grounded in deficit thinking.

A Reinforcement of Hegemonic Systems

Finally, scholars who study deficit thinking highlight its negative effects. Ultimately, they underscore that deficit thinking fuels a wide array of negative consequences that reinforce oppressive systems and inequities in society and education. For example, they contribute to educators having lower expectations of students from historically oppressed social identity groups (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009) and can predispose these students to disengagement (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005) while masking how this deficit thinking undermines success (Pérez, Ashlee, Do, Karikari, & Sim, 2017).

It is also important to note that the emphasis on individual and cultural deficiencies perpetuates assumptions that our system should seek a quick fix to remedy disparate experiences and outcomes (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Vass, 2012) rather than focus on addressing core systems of oppression and systemic inequities that permeate social and educational institutions. In doing so, deficit thinking prevents policy makers, educators, and communities from focusing on the actual root causes of the challenges that people of color, low-income populations, and other minoritized groups face.

Implications for Scholarly Research

Our analysis of literature has several implications for future scholarly research. In this final section, we discuss implications of this review for researchers who aim to critique the deficit nature of the existing research, discourses, policies, and practices. We also provide recommendations for scholars who are conducting research that is designed to advance anti-deficit thinking.

- 1 First, when critiquing deficit thinking, we encourage scholars to define the key elements of their conceptualization for clarity. Researchers might engage the key elements that we outline herein to frame their analysis. Regardless of which definition and conceptualization scholars employ, we encourage them to clarify how and why they have framed deficit thinking in this way. Providing a clear definition can minimize the likelihood that they misapply this concept or readers interpret their analysis in ways that cause confusion.
- 2 Second, we encourage scholars to consistently consider all of the key elements of deficit thinking in their analysis. All four elements outlined herein are critical in efforts to accurately evaluate whether research, policies, or practices are deficit oriented. However, it is important to note that although systemic origins, pervasive and implicit traits, and negative effects are characteristic of many ideologies, the blaming the victim component of deficit thinking is what makes it distinct. Therefore, we encourage researchers to pay special attention to this element in their analysis. Doing so will ensure that researchers do not label scholarship deficit-oriented because it examines the systemic, institutional, and environmental challenges that historically oppressed populations face. Such research can be considered to be in direct opposition to the perpetuation of deficit ideologies and discourses.
- 3 Third, we encourage researchers who seek to critique the deficit nature of language to consider the larger sociopolitical and discursive contexts within which it is generated and used. This recommendation is especially important because scholars and advocates often strategically utilize language that can sometimes be used to reinforce deficit thinking in their efforts to advance anti-deficit agendas, and it is therefore important for critical analyses to take

this complexity into account. For example, racial disparities can be utilized to reinforce deficit thinking when they are embedded in larger discourses that are deficit oriented (e.g., when individual or cultural factors are framed as the cause of these disparities), but scholars also highlight racial inequalities to justify and elevate work that critiques larger structural inequities, centers the voices of communities of color, and advances anti-deficit perspectives. In such cases, concluding that the use of language or tools (e.g., discussion of disparities) is deficit- oriented ignores the larger overall impact of these efforts, obscures the lines between harmful deficit narratives and those that are counterhegemonic, and may unintentionally hinder important anti-deficit scholarship and advocacy.

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Finally, it is important to underscore the diverse ways in which scholars and activists can and often do advance anti-deficit perspectives and discourses, as doing so can help minimize confusion about whether work is reinforcing or challenging deficit thinking. One way that scholars challenge deficit ideologies is by critiquing deficit thinking that is embedded within existing discourses, systems, institutions, and environments. Researchers can advance anti-deficit thinking by centering the voices of historically oppressed communities in research, policy, and practice to humanize these populations. The power of such research to challenge deficit thinking lies in its ability to excavate systemic forces that shape the conditions that these populations face, the ways in which they navigate these contexts, and the complexity of their realities (e.g., revealing both the challenges they face and their successes). Scholars also utilize knowledge from historically oppressed populations to generate new frameworks and ways of understanding core social and educational processes. This work has the potential to generate new discourses that better account for structural inequities and advance anti-deficit paradigms and discourses.

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