

The Development of Critical Consciousness

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Abstract

Critical consciousness refers to the ability to recognize and analyze oppressive political, economic, and social forces shaping society, and to take action against these forces. Critical consciousness is often conceptualized as consisting of three distinct yet overlapping dimensions: critical reflection, political self-efficacy, and sociopolitical action. In this review, we report on a growing body of scholarship that has found critical consciousness to be predictive of a number of key outcomes for both individuals from oppressed groups and their communities. We also report on a number of conceptual frameworks theorizing the processes underlying critical consciousness development; describe several new scales for measuring such development; and review a diverse set of pedagogical approaches to fostering critical consciousness development. Finally, we conclude with several of the key issues that we believe are ripe for scholars interested in critical consciousness and sociopolitical development to take on in the coming years.

Key Words: Critical consciousness, sociopolitical development, civic development, critical pedagogy, youth activism

The Development of Critical Consciousness

As researchers interested in the ways schools and educators can impact social change, we have spent the past several years investigating the role that urban high schools can play in fostering their students' critical consciousness—these adolescents' ability to recognize and resist the oppressive forces shaping their lives and communities. This investigation has included frequent observations of the cultures and teaching practices within such schools.

At Leadership High School—a small public high school in New York City serving predominantly African American adolescents—students have the opportunity to participate in a literature course that centers the experiences of African Americans. During a unit in this class that included reading Michelle Alexander's (2010) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, a teacher at Leadership High School engaged her 11th and 12th grade students in a lesson that utilized learning stations to present historical facts, current statistics, and scholarly perspectives on the subject of mass incarceration. One of the learning stations presented a series of political cartoons that students responded to using post-its. After the students had cycled through all of the stations, the teacher asked the class to share out what stood out to them from each. The following dialogue took place in response to the political cartoons:

Student 1: In the cartoon, it was two guys, and one was the public education system and one was prison industrial complex. I noticed that the one on the right had their mouth wide open, so they were more hungry for people to go to jail.

Student 2: It showed how Black people still go to school, get an education, and are told they will be successful, but they are directed to another window and still go to jail.

Student 3: Another cartoon showed a cycle of people going in and out of prison.

Teacher: We can look at it as three people going in and three people coming out, or as the same three people going back in. This is called *recidivism*. What can influence that?

Student 4: Parole. You're given rules to follow, and if you don't follow those rules, you wind up back in jail.

Student 5: They don't have the support to help them, so they end up doing the same thing that landed them in jail.

Over the course of this hour-long lesson, the Leadership High School teacher provided the students with the resources to learn about the multiple factors that constitute and perpetuate the system of mass incarceration. In the discussion that followed the activity, she facilitated a student-centered dialogue in which students built off of each other's ideas and used the information they gained to make sense of the ways in which race, class, and power intersect to maintain inequity through the criminal justice system.

In reflecting on the lesson, this teacher explained that most of the students in the class had initially expressed the notion that those who are incarcerated are guilty and deserve to be imprisoned. Their experiences in this day's lesson began to chip away at those beliefs, exposing the injustices that lay embedded within what they had thought was a fair system. Practices such as these can support young people's critical consciousness development by providing them with the tools necessary to resist and challenge oppressive forces.

In this chapter, we report on the research and scholarship that suggests the work going on at Leadership High School and other schools to foster students' critical consciousness has positive effects upon a variety of key outcomes including academic achievement, mental health, resilience, and political engagement. We offer different scholars' perspectives on what it means for an individual to be critically conscious; how to measure critical consciousness; and different approaches that parents, educators, and others have utilized to foster such consciousness. In so doing, we seek to illuminate for scholars, educators, parents, and other stakeholders what we believe to be a powerful tool for students both to resist the negative effects of oppression and simultaneously repair a world marred by such oppression and inequality.

Defining Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is defined as the ability to recognize and analyze oppressive political, economic and social forces shaping society, and to take action against these forces (Freire, 1973). The term and concept of critical consciousness is most commonly associated with Brazilian philosopher-educator Paulo Freire (Irwin, 2012). Freire (1970) characterized oppression as “the result of an unjust social order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed” (p. 45). While working with migrant laborers in Brazil to develop their literacy, Freire realized that the adult workers in his literacy program were motivated to learn to read in order to understand and challenge the social forces impacting their social status and opportunities (Irwin, 2012). From these workers’ experiences, Freire (1970) came to believe that oppressed populations needed to be able to read the *world* in addition to being able to read the word if they were going to work for social change. Freire concluded that a primary goal of education should be to engage students in learning to decode and challenge their social conditions, and he coined the term conscientização, or critical consciousness, to refer to this combination of reflection and action by oppressed groups upon the world in order to transform it. He regarded critical consciousness as a key step in combating such oppression, violence, and dehumanization.

Scholars suggest that critical consciousness consists of three distinct yet overlapping components: 1) critical reflection or critical social analysis; 2) political self-efficacy; and 3) critical or sociopolitical action (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011). *Critical reflection* refers to the ability to name and analyze forces of inequality. It extends beyond basic knowledge and instead encompasses an ability to analyze the root of oppression as situated in structural and institutional forces. Freire (1970) theorized that as marginalized groups develop critical reflection, the

“dominant narratives that hide or perpetuate oppression lose credibility” (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015, p. 849) and individuals and groups can “challenge accepted explanations for social phenomena” (Montero, 2009, p. 78). *Political self-efficacy* (sometimes referred to as a sense of agency or critical motivation) is the internal belief that one has the capacity to effect social change. This sense of efficacy or agency is a critical component of critical consciousness as it helps move individuals or collectives from knowledge (critical reflection) to a willingness and desire to act. Finally, *critical action* refers to an individual’s actual engagement in events and activities intended to challenge these oppressive forces and structures, and the unequal conditions they perpetuate. This action can take a wide range of forms and can be individual or collective.

The combination of these three components is what Freire calls praxis. While each component of critical consciousness has a distinct meaning and purpose, they are theorized to be a cycle of development (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Put another way, development in one component can impact development in others. For example, a young person who participates in a protest against school closures (critical action) might through that action come to learn additional information about the system and processes of school closings and thus further develop their critical reflection. Additionally, that same young person could experience a deepening of political efficacy as a result of their participation in the protest. Given these mutually reinforcing relationships, it is important that critical consciousness is understood as consisting of all three components: critical reflection, political self-efficacy and critical action.

As noted above, Freire (1973) explicitly emphasized the ways in which critical reflection, self-efficacy, and action functioned, not in a linear fashion, but as a cycle of development. Nonetheless, much of the contemporary scholarship on critical consciousness development has

positioned the development of critical reflection as preceding engagement in critical action (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016) in much the same fashion that Lawrence Kohlberg's (1984) cognitive-developmental theory positions advances in moral reasoning as then strengthening an individual's capacity and motivation to engage in moral action. More recently, a number of scholars (e.g. Watts & Flanagan, 2007) have sought to re-emphasize the point that Freire's emphasis on praxis envisions a more reciprocal relationship between the components of critical consciousness such that, as in the example above, an individual's participation in protests against school closings (critical action) might then engender development of their critical reflection and efficacy as well.

Although Freire is typically cited as the key foundational source of critical consciousness scholarship, it is important to note that Freire's ideas were greatly influenced by a wide range of influences including 18th century German philosopher Georg Hegel's writings on the master-slave dialectic and 20th century Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's work on the psychopathology of colonization (Irwin, 2012). Additionally, the underlying components of critical consciousness are found in liberation efforts in other educational traditions as well. For example, the concepts that comprise critical consciousness are also rooted in an African American tradition of education known as "Education for Liberation" (Payne, 2008). Education for Liberation is described as the "self-conscious use of education as an instrument of liberation... with the intention of helping people think more critically about the social forces shaping their lives and think more confidently about their ability to act against those forces" (Payne, 2008, p.1-2). Many educational interventions drawing on this framework were in operation prior to Freire's published works on critical consciousness including Citizen Schools started by Myles Horton and Septima Clark in 1958; Freedom Schools organized by the Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the summer of 1964; Black Panther Party Liberation Schools run by various Black Panther chapters beginning in 1969; and Afrocentric schools which are still in operation today. All of these efforts featured explicit goals of increasing the sociopolitical consciousness and activist efforts of Black people (Anderson & Khareem, 2009; Payne, 2008). Through a cycle of ongoing political education, developing a sense of political efficacy and training youth and adults for activism, these historical institutions similarly enacted a cycle of reflection and action intended to help a marginalized population pursue liberation.

Critical Consciousness & Terminology

In the ensuing sections, we will report on the extant research literature on the development of critical consciousness and its relationship to other key individual and collective outcomes. Prior to doing so, however, it is important to note that other terms are used in psychology and education scholarship to describe the combination of reflection and action upon the world that Freire termed critical consciousness. The most prevalent alternative term for critical consciousness is sociopolitical development (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1994). Watts and colleagues explicitly reference Freire's work on critical consciousness as the "cognitive cornerstone" of sociopolitical development (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999), which they define as the growth in an individual's "knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and capacity for action in political and social systems" (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003, p. 185). This scholarship on sociopolitical development has also given rise to terms such as sociopolitical consciousness (e.g. Jackson, 2011; Seider et al., 2017) and sociopolitical action (e.g. Hodson, 1999; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015) to describe the critical reflection and critical action dimensions of both critical consciousness and sociopolitical development.

Although they do not offer alternative terms for critical consciousness, several other scholars leverage critical consciousness as a foundational concept in their frameworks. For example, radical healing (Ginwright, 2010), and critically compassionate intellectualism (Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009) build upon Freire's foundation, as do broader education frameworks such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). We draw upon all of this research in the ensuing sections of this chapter to describe the relationship between critical consciousness and key individual and collective outcomes, as well as interventions that have been shown to support critical consciousness development.

Conceptual Frameworks for Critical Consciousness Development

As described in the Introduction, Paulo Freire (1973) conceived of critical consciousness as the ability to decode and challenge oppressive social forces shaping society and one's status in it. That said, Freire's work on critical consciousness emerged in a particular educational context (teaching adult laborers in Brazil) and particular disciplinary lens (philosophy of education). As a result, Thomas and colleagues (2014) noted that a number of psychologists and educators in recent years have "adopted and expanded" Freire's original conception of critical consciousness for greater relevance to their own social and educational contexts. Within the field of psychology, for example, scholars have characterized critical consciousness as an *awareness* of inequity and oppression (Shin et al., 2016); a *skill* for resisting the negative effects of oppressive events and interactions as they occur (Isom, 2002; Phan, 2010); and a *dimension* of an individual's social identity or ethnic group consciousness (Quintana, Castenada-English, & Ybarra, 1999).

Other contemporary scholars have offered conceptual frameworks for critical consciousness development. Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999) developed a five-stage

theory of oppression and critical consciousness development. Within this model, each stage represents an increased level of critical consciousness, with the ability to analyze and navigate oppressive social forces positioned as “necessary building blocks” to developing a deep and active commitment to challenging oppressive social forces through social action (p. 259). Specifically, an individual in the first stage (acritical) does not recognize resource inequity among different groups while an individual in the second stage (adaptive) recognizes this asymmetry and seeks out strategies for navigating this inequity. In the third stage (precritical), individuals become increasingly concerned about the role of inequity within their society, and the fourth stage (critical) entails taking steps to actively learn more about the sources of this inequity and what can be done to address it. Finally, individuals in the fifth stage (liberation) actively challenge inequity and oppression through participation in personal and collective social action. Although Watts, Griffith and Abdul-Adil (1999) present this model as a stage theory, they also acknowledge the value of conceptualizing these stages as statuses in order to emphasize the idea that there is no single starting point or ending point in the development of critical consciousness.

In keeping with this iterative and fluid perspective, Watts and Flanagan (2007) offered a conceptual framework to explain the relationship between the three components of critical consciousness in which engagement in social action remains the principal outcome, but this engagement is clearly defined as a bi-directional relationship with an individual’s ability to critically analyze “political, economic, cultural and other systemic forces that shape society and one’s status in it” (p. 784). Additionally, these scholars reiterated that the relationship between social analysis and social action is mediated by an individual’s sense of individual and collective efficacy around engaging in social action (agency). Adding a novel component to existing

frameworks of critical consciousness, Watts and Flanagan asserted that the relationship between reflection, agency and action is further mediated by the availability of meaningful opportunities to engage in such social action (opportunity structure).

Extending on traditional frameworks of critical consciousness, Seider and colleagues (2016, 2017) offer a critical consciousness framework that consists of the ability to analyze, navigate, and challenge the oppressive social forces shaping one's life and community. Similar to the concept of critical reflection (Diemer et al., 2015), the ability to analyze oppressive social force entails recognizing the causes and consequences of inequality. Navigating oppressive social forces entails recognizing the obstacles that oppression places in one's path and identifying ways to circumvent those obstacles. Finally, challenging oppressive social forces is defined similarly to critical action (Diemer et al., 2015) in that it entails engaging in the collection social action necessary to overturn existing systems of oppression.

While this framework contains two of the central aspects of critical consciousness according to Freire, the framework diverges from Freire's (1973) foundational work on critical consciousness in its inclusion of navigating oppressive social forces as a dimension of critical consciousness. Specifically, Freire (1973) positioned engagement in collective social action to challenge oppression as the ultimate goal of critical consciousness and expressed little clear support for oppressed people's acquiring the skills necessary to navigate within an oppressive system.

The frameworks described in the preceding paragraphs focus specifically on the development of critical consciousness; however, another important question is how critical consciousness aligns with broader models of human development. In his lifespan model of psychosocial development, Erikson (1965, 1968) characterized adolescence as a peak period in

the lifespan for identity exploration. Erikson (1965) defined identity as one's sense of self and theorized that individuals possess both a personal identity and an ego identity. The personal identity develops within an individual while the ego identity develops from the individual's relationships with other persons, institutions, and socio-historical context. According to Erikson (1968), ego identity development entails adolescents moving beyond a basic adherence to the beliefs and values of their nuclear family, and seeking out additional ways of understanding the world around them. In so doing, adolescents confront for the first time the question: "How do I fit into the world around me?" In recent years, a number of scholars have argued that, in societies where the entry into adulthood has been delayed, much of this identity exploration work has extended into early (or "emerging") adulthood as well (Arnett, 2004). Engaging in critical analysis of the social forces shaping one's life, then, fits into Erikson's framework as a normative dimension of adolescent and emerging adult identity exploration.

Such a perspective finds further support in work by Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996) to integrate the experiences of youth from marginalized groups into classic developmental models. Specifically, Garcia Coll et al. (1996) argued that developmental models such as Erikson's, which emerged from his empirical work with individuals from privileged groups, failed to adequately account for the sociocultural contexts of people from historically oppressed groups. According to these scholars, ego identity development for individuals from oppressed groups includes recognizing and adapting to the effects of sociopolitical forces such as racism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression. In this way, Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996) position critical consciousness as a normative element of positive development for adolescents from historically oppressed groups.

Finally, it is important to note that each of the frameworks described in this section have focused specifically on individuals from historically oppressed groups developing critical consciousness about their own oppression. There continues to be scholarly debate about whether critical consciousness is the correct term to apply to the process of increased awareness and action for members of privileged groups. A number of scholars argue that effectively combatting oppression requires individuals from privileged groups to develop the consciousness necessary to recognize the causes and consequences of their own privileged status, and work to reject such privilege (e.g. Swalwell, 2013; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003), yet they suggest that as critical consciousness was theorized based on the experiences of marginalized groups, another related process may have to be theorized for privileged populations. Other scholars claim that individuals from privileged groups should seek to serve as allies to those contending with oppression, but that allyship is distinct from critical consciousness and requires separate frameworks and theories of development (e.g. Diemer et al., 2016; Swalwell, 2013).

Critical Consciousness & Key Outcomes

A growing body of research has found critical consciousness to be an important predictor of key outcomes for individuals marginalized by inequities in race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and language. Namely, scholars have reported that critical consciousness can foster in such individuals a number of positive outcomes including resilience (Ginwright, 2010; Nicolas et al., 2008; O’Leary & Romero, 2011), mental health (Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, & Maton, 1999), self-esteem (Godfrey, Santos, & Burson, in press), academic engagement (O’Connor, 1997; Ramos-Zayas, 2003), academic achievement (Cabrera et al., 2014), enrollment in higher education (Rogers & Terriquez, 2013), professional aspirations (Diemer & Blustein, 2005; Diemer & Hsieh, 2008), and civic and political

engagement (Diemer & Li, 2011; Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011). In explaining these relationships, Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) noted that critical consciousness allows such individuals to become aware of oppression and exclusion, recognize their own membership in oppressed groups, and explore the links between marginalization and oppressive social forces. In so doing, critical consciousness may act as a buffer against the negative effects of oppression by replacing feelings of isolation and self-blame for one's challenges with a sense of engagement in a broader collective struggle for social justice (e.g. Diemer, Rapa, Park & Perry, 2014; Ginwright, 2010).

Other scholars have reported on key collective outcomes that can come about as a result of members of a particular community demonstrating heightened levels of critical consciousness. For example, Aldana (2014) and Diemer et al. (2016) argue that youth civic engagement is a key lever for social change within communities. They note that youth-led social action initiatives have sought to improve the conditions in schools and communities (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Mediratta, Fruchter, & Lewis, 2002; Oakes, Rogers & Lipton, 2006; Su, 2009) including the need for sufficient resources (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002), persistence of racial opportunity gaps (Christens & Kirshner, 2011) and tracking practices that discriminate against English learners (Speer, 2008).

While a growing body of scholarship points to critical consciousness as a key predictor of positive individual and collective outcomes, a handful of scholars have challenged these conclusions, in particular, with regards to the critical reflection component of critical consciousness. For example, Laurin and colleagues (2011) have reported that, for young adults from historically oppressed groups, maintaining beliefs in societal fairness enhances their motivation to pursue long-term goals. Likewise, Dalbert (2001) found that maintaining a belief

in a just world functions for members of socially disadvantaged groups as a “positive illusion” that correlates with well-being and mental health. In sum, a growing body of scholarship points to critical consciousness as a key predictor of important academic, civic, and health outcomes for individuals and the communities in which they live and work; however, additional scholarship is needed to clarify and confirm these relationships.

Measuring Critical Consciousness

One obstacle to conducting empirical research on critical consciousness development over the past forty years has been the lack of validated measures of critical consciousness. Instead, researchers relied on proxy measures that aligned with particular dimensions of critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2015). Fortunately, a number of scholars—relying primarily on samples in the United States—have recently developed and validated new measures of critical consciousness that offer great promise for critical consciousness research going forward.

The Critical Consciousness Inventory (Thomas et al., 2014) is a 9-item scale that takes Watts et al.’s (1999) stage theory of oppression and sociopolitical development as its theoretical framework. The Critical Consciousness Inventory is intended to be a uni-dimensional measure, but includes items related to a) sociopolitical development; b) social perspective-taking; and c) responses to oppression. The measure was validated in a study involving a racially diverse sample of approximately 200 college students from two Midwestern universities.

The Critical Consciousness Scale (Diemer et al., 2014) is a 22-item measure with Likert-style responses that takes as its guiding theoretical framework Freire’s (1973) conceptualization of critical consciousness as the praxis of critical reflection and critical action. The Critical Consciousness Scale consists of three sub-scales focused on perceived inequality, egalitarianism, and sociopolitical participation. The first two sub-scales serve as measures of critical reflection

while the third sub-scale serves as a measure of critical action. The Critical Consciousness Scale can be used with both adolescent and adult populations.

The Measure of Adolescent Critical Consciousness (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016) is a 10-item measure with Likert scale responses that focuses on Latinx adolescents' critical consciousness of racial injustice. The measure consists of two sub-scales: critical agency and critical action. The critical agency sub-scale assesses participants' feelings of commitment and self-efficacy around challenging issues of racial injustice. The critical action sub-scale assesses participants' engagement in actions that promote justice and challenge racism.

The Contemporary Critical Consciousness Measure (Shin et al., 2016) is a 19-item measure to which participants respond along a 7-point Likert scale. The measure is intended for adolescents and adults from both privileged and oppressed groups, and consists of three sub-scales focused on critical consciousness of racism, classism and heterosexism. This measure focuses on attitudes and awareness of oppressive social forces rather than people's motivation or commitment to engaging in action challenging such forces.

Finally, the Sociopolitical Consciousness measure (Baker & Brookins, 2014) differs from the four other critical consciousness scales described above in that its content emerged from a qualitative study of Salvadoran adolescents' perceptions of key dimensions of their community. From this qualitative study emerged a number of themes for which the researchers then developed and adapted survey items including sociopolitical awareness, problem-solving efficacy, collective responsibility for the poor, localized community efficacy, collective belief in action, belief in a just world, and equality and rights. As is evident in these seven themes, the Sociopolitical Consciousness measure incorporates a greater emphasis on the collective dimensions of critical consciousness than the previously-described scales. The emergence of

each of these measures greatly increases the ability of scholars going forward to identify the relationship between critical consciousness and positive outcomes; to investigate particular dimensions of critical consciousness and their relationship to one another; and to increase comparability across research studies of critical consciousness (Luginbuhl, McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016).

Fostering Critical Consciousness

In terms of *fostering* critical consciousness, scholars have reported that critical consciousness development can be promoted through any space or medium that has a significant influence on one's social development, including family (Hernández, Almeida, & Vecchio, 2005), community (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006), schools (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014), and media (Morrell, 2002). Below, we describe a number of the key practices emerging from this scholarship.

Critical consciousness in schools. Much of the extant research on fostering critical consciousness focuses on adolescent and adult development through schooling practices and school or community-based organizations. This is likely due, in part, to such places representing the non-familial spaces in which youth spend much of their time as well as Freire's (1973) extensive writing about formal and informal educational spaces as key sites for critical consciousness development. Specifically, Freire (1970) described traditional approaches to education as a "banking model" in which the teacher serves as an authority figure who deposits knowledge into students. He (1973) characterized this banking model as antithetical to critical consciousness development in that students from oppressed groups are taught to adapt to their conditions rather than learning to challenge the social forces that oppress them. Instead, Freire (1973) argued that critical consciousness is best engendered through a "problem-posing

education” in which the educator poses reality as a problem to be investigated by teachers and students and in which “both are simultaneously students and teachers” (p. 72). In so doing, students come to see their community and broader society as capable of transformation, and to see themselves as possessing the capacity to serve as agents of such transformation.

Two key, interrelated tools that Freire (1973) developed for fostering critical consciousness are codes and culture circles. A code is any type of image or object that is familiar to students from their everyday lives and “re-presents” their own reality back to them and allows for an emotional response (Wallerstein, 1987). Such a code then becomes the starting point for a culture circle, which Freire (1973) characterized as a “live and creative dialogue in which everyone knows some things and does not know others, in which all seek together to know more” (p. 87). The role of the teacher is to coordinate the circle, rather than direct it, by asking questions and sharing information that promotes critical thinking. Through these dialogic strategies, Freire (1973) asserted that students begin to take charge of their learning and start to see themselves as social and political beings— a key step in the development of their critical consciousness.

Freire’s work has served as a guide for a number of contemporary efforts to foster critical consciousness both inside and outside of traditional school spaces. However, Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1998) himself acknowledged that a challenge for teachers in engaging in problem-posing pedagogy is that most were, themselves, educated within a banking model, and find it difficult to engage in authentic learning partnerships with their students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Kincheloe (2008) highlights this tension when describing the traditional structures of schooling: “These contexts are shaped in the same ways language and knowledge are constructed, as historical power makes particular practices seem natural— as if they could

have been constructed no other way” (p. 2). As a result, in spite of the field of teacher education increasingly normalizing language that includes social justice and equity, within traditional public schools, educators adopting Freire’s problem-posing approach to learning are still considered to be engaging in “fugitive acts” (Patel, 2016) in the mainstream classroom, and teaching for critical consciousness can become an “act of resistance” (Kincheloe, 2012, p. 6).

Another challenge present in teaching for critical consciousness in traditional school spaces is that these sites are also responsible for teaching students the dominant language and codes in order to function in society as it exists (Kincheloe, 2008). Macedo described this tension in a dialogue with Paulo Freire: “On the one hand, students have to become literate about their histories, experiences, and the culture of their immediate environment. On the other hand, they must also appropriate those codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so they can transcend their environments” (Freire & Macedo, 2003, p. 354). The critical pedagogue then becomes responsible for fostering in students an understanding of society both as it is and as it could be.

Critical literacy. According to Freire (1970), an essential component of critical consciousness development is that of critical literacy, or the ability for one to “read the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1998). This view of literacy focuses on the role of language in shaping and transforming society (Shor, 1999). It also takes into account the multiple ways of being literate, the relationship between literacy and liberation, and the ways in which literacy practices are rooted in culture and community (Street, 2003; Paris, 2012). In her work on critical literacy practices, Lee (2007) offers culturally responsive strategies for critical literacy development, including “cultural modeling,” which involves teaching students structures for complex reasoning and problem-solving. This approach is also rooted in the understanding that texts are embedded with particular ideologies, and in order for individuals to develop critical

understandings of themselves and of the world, they must develop skills in critically examining the role of power and voice in dominant and non-dominant texts and analyzing culture and society as text. This approach to teaching centers the cultural knowledge and identities of the students in their learning and situates both teachers and students as learners and knowledge-holders. As Shor (1987) argues, “Critical education has to integrate the students and the teachers into a mutual creation and re-creation of knowledge” (p. 8). It is through this inquiry that classrooms become transformative spaces for learning and critical action.

Critical media literacy. Acknowledging that young people are developing within an increasingly digital world, Morrell (2004) highlights the role that popular culture can play in fostering critical consciousness in the classroom through a critical reading of media texts. This practice of critical media literacy invites popular media into the classroom for a critical investigation of the codes and ideologies embedded in these cultural texts. Kelly (2013) argues that since adolescents are immersed in popular media and therefore receive implicit ideological messages about society and power through media, studying a range of media texts in academic spaces is an essential component of critical literacy development in schools. Hip Hop music and culture has been described as an especially powerful form of culturally relevant text for critical media literacy development, as it offers a “site of identity negotiation” and a “view of the human freedom struggle and aspects of the knowledge that people have about the world” (Richardson, 2006, p. 9).

In her teacher-researcher study of a high school hip hop literature class, Kelly (2016) discusses the ways in which the study of hip hop texts led to classroom discussions about the intersections of race, class, gender, and power. Watts, Abdul-Adil, and Pratt (2002) describe similar work in the development of an after school “Young Warriors” program which engages

African American adolescent males in critically analyzing issues of race, gender, class, and community action through their discussions of hip hop music and videos. The program's pedagogical approach closely resembles a Freire Culture Circle in that an adult facilitator introduces a rap video or film clip (the code) to participating adolescents, who then sit together in a circle and engage in dialogue about the video's portrayal of social forces influencing them and their communities. Watts and colleagues (2002) reported preliminary evidence of participating adolescents demonstrating increases in the frequency of their critical thinking responses over the course of the Young Warriors sessions, as well as an increased willingness to engage in intellectual risk-taking and to share their learning with peers not participating in the group.

Participatory action research. Other scholars and educators have focused on the role of action research in both in-school and out-of-school settings as a lever for fostering youth critical consciousness. Fine (2008) characterizes participatory action research as grounded in principles that a) participants in traditional research studies possess expertise and knowledge that they are not asked to share, and b) individuals from historically oppressed groups possess wisdom about the causes and consequences of such oppression. Within a youth participatory action research project, youth take the lead in constructing research questions, designing the research study, collecting data, and sharing the results. In keeping with Freire's work, youth participants serve as subjects rather than objects within a participatory action research study. For example, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) describe their participation in the South City High School Futures Project, which engaged working-class African American and Latinx adolescents in learning about educational inequity. Participating students first studied the factors leading to opportunity gaps for students of color within their school and then worked to collect data on these factors that

subsequently informed class action lawsuits brought by the American Civil Liberties Union against the state of California.

Building upon the work of YPAR scholars, Kirshner (2015) describes critical civic inquiry (CCI) as incorporating participatory action research with critical inquiry and civic engagement. Within a CCI framework, secondary teachers collaborate with their adolescent students in developing a deeper understanding of inequity within educational systems and work collectively to address such inequity within their own school community. Kirshner describes CCI projects ranging from students raising awareness of their school's need for better facilities to calling attention to racism within the school as guided by three core principles: sharing power, critical conversations about educational equity, and participatory action research. In essence, teachers and students engage in learning and discussion about issues of inequity and then develop a project to investigate and challenge such inequity within their own school community. Such a process aligns with Rubin's (2007) work on the role of both dimensions of critical civic inquiry in fostering "more active civic identities" in participating adolescents (p. 475).

Social justice and ethnic studies coursework. Another set of scholars have investigated the role of social justice and ethnic studies coursework in fostering adolescents' critical consciousness (e.g. Cammarota, 2007, 2011; Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009). For example, Cammarota and colleagues developed a Social Justice Education Program (SJEP) that engaged "at-risk" Latinx adolescents in a Tucson, Arizona high school in studying issues relevant to their own social context. The course content included Chicano studies, critical social theory, and participatory action research along with traditional state requirements for U.S. History and Government coursework. The program sought to foster participating adolescents' critically compassionate intellectualism—a concept drawn directly from Freire's work on critical

consciousness— by developing their intellectual skills, commitments, and capacity to challenge oppression and hegemony facing their community (Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009).

In his scholarship on the initial cohort of students in the Social Justice Education Program, Cammarota (2007) reported that 16 of the 17 “at-risk” adolescents in the program graduated from high school, and ten went on to college. All of these students cited SJEP as having strengthened their capacity to succeed in college and work for social change. In more recent work on the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program that built upon the SJEP foundation and was adopted by secondary schools across the Tucson Unified School district, Cabrera et al. (2014) found that students participating in the program had significantly higher standardized test scores and high school graduation rates than peers who had not participated in the program.

Alternatives to Freire’s problem-posing model. As is evident in the preceding paragraphs, many of the contemporary approaches to fostering critical consciousness draw directly from Freire’s (1973) work on problem-posing education (e.g. Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kirshner, 2015; Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002). As noted earlier in this chapter, however, it is important to remember that educational approaches that predate Freire’s work have sought to foster youth critical consciousness as well. For example, historian Daniel Perlstein (2002) noted that the Black Panther Liberation Schools founded in California in the 1960s took a “banking model” approach to educating Black youth about the “nature of the struggle and... transferring to them the means for waging that struggle” (Eldridge Cleaver as quoted by Perlstein, 2002, p. 261). Likewise, contemporary African-centered schools such as the Betty Shabazz International Charter Schools in Chicago, Illinois seek to deepen students’ critical consciousness through an African-Centered pedagogy which sometimes positions teachers in a

more parental role than the egalitarian teacher-student relationship for which Freire advocated (Lee, 2008). Finally, Seider and colleagues (2016, 2017a, 2017b) have reported that students attending urban secondary schools featuring diverse schooling models demonstrated critical consciousness development along different dimensions of critical consciousness. All of this work raises important questions about the relationship Freire posited between critical consciousness development and a singular pedagogical approach. Or, to paraphrase historian Daniel Perlstein (2002), perhaps no single pedagogical approach inherently serves the cause of social justice.

Challenges to fostering critical consciousness. The preceding paragraphs offer numerous and important approaches to fostering youth and adult critical consciousness; however, a number of scholars have also presented theoretical frameworks that highlight the challenges underlying such development. Lerner's (1980) just world theory posits that individuals are motivated to perceive the world in which they live as a just one because such a belief allows one to perceive one's own goals and ambitions as attainable. According to Lerner, this motivation to perceive the world as a just one leads individuals to avoid the critical social analysis that represents a key dimension of critical consciousness in favor of individualistic explanations for inequity. A number of scholars have reported that belief in a just world varies across cultural contexts; for example, in the United States, African Americans demonstrate lower belief in a just world than White Americans (Hunt, 2000). Likewise, individuals from countries with social inequality formally built into their social policies and practices (e.g. India's caste system) demonstrate stronger belief in a just world than nations espousing more egalitarian principles (Furnham, 1993).

Jost et al.'s (2004) system justification theory similarly argues that individuals possess a generalized motive to perceive the existing social order as a just one because such a perception

allows for the possibility of individual advancement. Again, perceiving the existing social order to be just represents an obstacle to engagement in the critical social reflection that represents a key dimension of critical consciousness. Jost and colleagues (2004) further report that, for individuals from oppressed or marginalized groups, legitimizing the existing social order can result in the acceptance of stereotypes and inferiority beliefs about one's own group. According to these scholars, then, a key challenge facing parents, educators and other stakeholders committed to the work of fostering youth critical consciousness is overcoming youths' motivation to perceive their own and others' circumstances as dictated primarily by individual choices or qualities rather than broader social, political, and economic forces.

Future Directions

The past several years have seen a steady uptick in critical consciousness research from scholars in developmental psychology, community psychology, education, and other fields. This increased focus is likely due in part to increased public consciousness and concern with inequality globally as a result of national and international protest movements such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy, and International Women's Day; highly-visible student protests at the local level on campuses ranging from the University of Missouri to Boston Latin School; political referenda such as England's Brexit vote; and the success (or near success) of populist politicians across the globe including U.S. President Donald J. Trump and French Presidential candidate Marine LePen. Moreover, the recent development and validation of new scales for measuring critical consciousness hold great potential for advancing the quantity and quality of scholarship focused on critical consciousness.

As the field moves forward, one question raised earlier in the chapter that is likely to continue to garner attention from scholars is whether individuals from privileged groups can

develop critical consciousness, or whether such individuals are best conceptualized as developing the skill-sets and mindsets of allies.

Relatedly, scholarship on critical consciousness development will need to consider and integrate a growing body of scholarship on intersectionality— the idea that development along one dimension of an individual’s identity such as race is not separate from the development of their other social identities (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012). An intersectional perspective complicates questions about *who* can develop critical consciousness by recognizing that individuals may belong to both privileged and oppressed groups simultaneously, and that these memberships impact and overlap with one another. Given that scholar bell hooks (1990) has long criticized Freire’s work for being insufficiently attuned to oppression due to gender and sexual orientation, there seem to be important opportunities in the coming years for both theory and research that explores the relationship between critical consciousness and intersectional identity development, and specifically whether one might be critically conscious in one dimension of oppression but not others.

Yet another related question concerns the “staying power” of critical consciousness. Specifically, is an individual who demonstrates high levels of critical consciousness about racial injustice as a young adult likely to maintain this level of critical consciousness fifty years later as an adult in his or her sixties or seventies? Are there particular qualities or contexts associated with such maintenance of critical consciousness?

Future scholarship on critical consciousness must also take on the question of whether critical consciousness— and approaches to fostering it— might take different forms in different eras and contexts. Recall that Freire’s foundational work on critical consciousness grew out of his work with adult migrant laborers who sought to understand and challenge their social

conditions under a military dictatorship in Brazil. It seems reasonable to consider whether engagement in critically conscious action might look differently for individuals living in countries led by authoritarian regimes than for those living in democratic societies with regular and peaceful transfers of power. Along similar lines, Freire positioned an egalitarian, dialogic problem-posing education as the appropriate approach to fostering the critical consciousness of the adult laborers with whom he worked. However, Freire (1986) also noted in his “Letter to North American Teachers” that, “Since education is by nature social, historical, and political, there is no way we can talk about some universal, unchanging role for the teacher” (p. 211). In this comment, Freire seems to explicitly invite contemporary educators to investigate new and different approaches to fostering critical consciousness in the youth they serve.

Another issue related to changing social contexts is whether individuals’ engagement in “thin” political participation through social media represents a form of collective social action that Freire and others have characterized as the ultimate goal of critical consciousness. According to Zuckerman (2013), “thin” political participation asks individuals only to “show up,” or carry out a pre-defined, light-touch activity such as “liking” a cause on Facebook whereas “thick” participation entails individuals investing their time, thinking, effort, and creativity into a civic or political endeavor.

A question, then, is whether “thin” political acts such as changing one’s Facebook profile picture to an icon of the Brexit movement, or retweeting a video of police violence constitute meaningful engagement in collective social action. Further complicating this question is that, in some contexts such as Egypt during the Arab Spring of 2010, engagement in opposition to the government via social media *did* represent an illegal activity that posed a true risk to individual and collective safety. Should the level of risk incurred in engaging in such virtual participation

also impact whether or not such actions are considered authentic forms of collective social action?

On one hand, such light-touch participation seems at odds with Freire's (1973) call for individuals to challenge their oppression by acting as critically-reflective subjects rather than objects. On the other hand, these forms of participation allow for a massive number of individuals across the globe to signal their support or opposition to a particular issue at a scale that Freire likely could not have envisioned during the time in which he wrote. In short, there will be great value in the coming years in scholars investigating how these contemporary forms of social action fit into— or necessitate the modification of— existing understandings of critical consciousness.

Finally, we are hopeful that future research and scholarship on critical consciousness will benefit from more collaboration between scholars with diverse theoretical and methodological backgrounds. The extant scholarship on critical consciousness has benefitted from the work of critical theorists (e.g. Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2015; Shor, 1987), ethnographic and participatory action scholars (e.g. Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ginwright, 2010); and quantitative methodologists (e.g. Diemer et al., 2014, Thomas et al., 2014). Likewise, one finds important scholarship on critical consciousness in fields ranging from psychology (Watts & Flanagan, 2007) to education (Seider et al., 2016) to public health (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002) to counseling (Shin et al., 2016). However, there appears to be relatively little dialogue or collaboration across these methodologies and academic disciplines. A handful of exceptions to this pattern have resulted in some of the most valuable scholarship in the field in recent years (e.g. Kirshner, Hipolito-Delgado, & Zion, 2015; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Likewise, our own collaborative work on critical consciousness has benefitted greatly from our varied

backgrounds and expertise around critical pedagogy, critical theory, and mixed methods intervention studies (El-Amin et al., 2017; Seider et al., 2016). We believe that additional collaboration across these disciplines—as well as between scholars, practitioners, parents, and youth— will have a powerful amplifying effect upon the current interest in critical consciousness scholarship and research in the years ahead.

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