"If they focus on giving us a chance in life we can actually do something in this world": Poverty, inequality and youths' critical consciousness

Amanda L. Roy[1]

C. Cybele Raver[2]

Michael D. Masucci[2]

Meriah DeJoseph[2]

[1] University of Illinois - Chicago
Department of Psychology
1007 West Harrison Street 1046D BSB
Chicago, IL 60607

[2]New York University
Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development
627 Broadway, 8th Floor
New York, NY 10012

Address all correspondence to the first author, Amanda L. Roy, Phone: 312-413-0992; Email: alroy28@uic.edu; Fax: 312-413-4122

Abstract

Critical consciousness (CC) has emerged as a framework for understanding how low-income and racial/ethnic minority youth recognize, interpret, and work to change the experiences and systems of oppression that they face in their daily lives. Despite this, relatively little is known about how youths' experiences with economic hardship and structural oppression shape how they "read their world" and motivate participation in critical action behaviors. We explore this issue using a mixed methods design and present our findings in two studies. In study one we examine the types of issues that a sample of low-income and predominantly racial/ethnic minority youth (ages 13-17) living in the Chicago area discuss when asked to reflect on issues that are important to them. The most commonly mentioned themes were community violence (59%), prejudice and intolerance (31%), world issues (25%), and economic disparities (18%). In study two we examine youths' quantitative reports of engaging in critical action behavior; over 65% had participated in at least one activity targeting social change in the previous six months. We then examined relationships between youths' experiences with poverty within their households and neighborhoods, neighborhood income inequality, and exposure to violence and youths' likelihood of participating in critical action behaviors. Greater exposure to violence and neighborhood income inequality were related to an increased likelihood of engaging in critical action behaviors. This work highlights the diverse ways that low-income and racial/ethnic minority youth reflect on societal inequality and their commitment to effecting change through sociopolitical participation.

Keywords: critical consciousness; poverty; income inequality; sociopolitical participation; adolescence; mixed methods

"If they focus on giving us a chance in life we can actually do something in this world":

Poverty, inequality and youths' critical consciousness

Developmental scientists and youth advocates have issued calls for greater recognition of young people (and particularly those who have been societally marginalized) as socio-politically active participants in their own futures and the futures of their communities (e.g. Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright, & James 2002; Gutiérrez, 2008; Kirshner, 2007; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). In keeping with this perspective, critical consciousness (CC) has emerged as a framework for understanding how youth "learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them," particularly when those conditions involve persistent and institutionalized discrimination or marginalization (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011, p. 44). As the social conditions and experiences of young people are multi-faceted and contextual, so too is the development of critical consciousness likely to be. The development of critical consciousness occurs in response to individual experiences and within the specific contexts that individuals are embedded (Carmen et al., 2015; Diemer, McWhirter, Ozer, & Rapa, 2015; Freire, 2000; Gutiérrez, 2008). Therefore, youths' reflections on the social issues that are important to them are likely to vary and, in part, be determined by differential experiences with marginalization and oppression.

Critical consciousness has been conceptualized as having three components: critical reflection (recognition and rejection of societal inequities), political efficacy (one's ability to effect change), and critical action (actions taken to change society e.g. community organizing) (Watts et al., 2011). Prior research on critical action behaviors among racial/ethnic minority and lower income youth has been mixed; some work has found rates of participation to be lower than those found in higher income, predominantly white samples (APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy 2004; Hart & Atkins 2002; Stepick & Stepick, 2002), while others describe

the varied ways that lower income, racial/ethnic minority youth participate in their schools and communities (Cohen, 2004; Ginwright, 2007; Kirshner, 2007; Rubin, 2007) despite differences in the types of opportunities available to them (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). In addition, recent research has found community-level income inequality to be *positively*, rather than negatively, related to higher levels of critical action, particularly among lower income youth (Godfrey & Cherng, 2016). Therefore, it may be that exposure to different types of economic hardship and structural oppression (i.e. number of years experiencing "deep poverty," perceptions of greater financial hardship, greater neighborhood income inequality and poverty, and higher exposure to violence) may differentially shape youths' identification of issues that matter to them and their likelihood of engaging in critical action behaviors.

The current manuscript uses a mixed-methods design to first (1) describe the issues that are important to a sample of low-income and predominantly racial/ethnic minority youth living in the Chicago area and then (2) predict the likelihood of their participation in critical action behaviors based on their experiences with different types of economic hardship and structural oppression. By asking youth to reflect on the issues that are important to them, we are able to descriptively explore the themes that youth spontaneously generate and consider the degree to which those themes embody critical reflection, specifically in terms of the types of social justice issues that youth identify. In addition, we explore whether youths' experiences with economic hardship and structural oppression are related to their participation in critical action behaviors. Specifically, we examine the degree to which youths' experiences with poverty within their households (# of years experiencing "deep poverty" and perceptions of financial hardship), neighborhood income inequality (Gini index of youths' residential census tract), neighborhood poverty (% poor within

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youths' residential census tracts) and youths' reports of exposure to violence within their families and communities are predictive of students' likelihood to take action. Many of the youth in our study live in neighborhoods with some of Chicago's highest levels of poverty and crime; accordingly, we examine the ways that youths' daily lived interactions with these aspects of economic hardship and structural oppression shape how they "read their world" and subsequently act to change it.

Critical Consciousness among Youth

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1973; 2000) defined critical consciousness as ''learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality'' (2000, p. 35). Freire developed CC as a pedagogical method to raise Brazilian peasants' ability to "read the world" or recognize the social conditions that foster inequality and marginalization, such as the unequal distribution of resources and access to opportunities (Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hsieh, 2006). Since its inception, CC has been embraced by scholars in multiple fields as a strategy for marginalized youth to resist oppression by helping them both understand and then work to change unjust social conditions through constructive social action (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright, & James 2002; Gutiérrez, 2008; Kirshner, 2007; Morrell, 2002; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Watts et al., 2011). Although individuals experiencing privilege in some aspects of their lives may also think critically about inequality and advocate for social change through critical action, the framework of CC was developed specific to the experiences of an oppressed population and subsequent scholarship has primarily applied this framework with similarly oppressed or marginalized populations (Cammarota, 2004; Diemer et al., 2015; Gutiérrez, 2008; Morrell, 2002). Moreover, one study

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found the positive benefits of CC on career development to be most evident among youth who experience racial/ethnic and socioeconomic oppression (Diemer et al., 2010).

In part driven by its interdisciplinary nature, critical consciousness has been defined in several different ways. As highlighted earlier, research coming out of the field of Psychology, has conceptualized critical consciousness as consisting of three components: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action (Watts et al. 2011; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Critical reflection involves the recognition and rejection of societal inequities based on characteristics/experiences such as race/ethnicity, gender, and economic standing that constrain well-being and agency. In addition, critical reflection is characterized by an ability to make more structural (e.g. we have an unequal social system that constrains opportunities) rather than individual (e.g. some people work harder) attributions about inequality (Watts et al., 2011). Political efficacy refers to an individual's perceived ability to effect social change via individual behavior and/or activism. Finally, critical action refers to the actual behaviors that individuals engage in to effect societal change. This can include a wide range of behaviors such as those represented in more traditional measures of civic engagement such as voting, to more proximal behaviors such as posting on social media about a social or political issue (Watts et al., 2011).

Some theory and empirical work have posited that critical reflection and critical action are closely intertwined, arguing that an individual's ability to recognize societal inequality is an important precursor to engaging in behavior to fight against it (Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Watts et al. 2011). Others, including Freire himself (1973, 2000), have conceptualized CC as a transactional process in which thought, action, and reflection occur in no specific order and without strict boundaries (Carmen et al., 2015). This perspective acknowledges that social context and lived

experience continuously shape individuals' understanding of oppression and their motivation and opportunity to engage in critical action.

Context and Critical Consciousness

What are the contextual factors that shape youths' understanding of inequality and oppression and motivate youth to engage in critical action behaviors? Prior work has argued that CC development occurs when marginalized youth are given the opportunity to and support for reflecting on and challenging social inequalities, which in turn can motivate desire to effect social change through engaging in critical action (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Balcazar, Tandon, Kaplan, & Izzo, 2001; Diemer et al., 2006; Diemer & Li, 2011; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Watts et al., 1999). Support for CC development can come from multiple sources in youths' lives including parents, peers, teachers, and community members. Empirical work with quantitative data has found sociopolitical support from both parents and peers to predict youths' critical action (Diemer & Li, 2011) while an open classroom climate was positively related to youths' critical action, but not critical reflection (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). In addition, qualitative examinations of youths' sociopolitical participation have consistently demonstrated the diverse ways that lower income, racial/ethnic minority youth both survive and resist the violence, inequality, and oppression that they face in their daily lives (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright, & James 2002; Gutiérrez, 2008; Kirshner, 2007; Morrell, 2002). Recent examples include youths' involvement in the Dreamers movement (Forenza, Rogers, & Lardier, 2017) and Black Lives Matter (El-Amin et al., 2017).

Although scholars have recognized the importance of opportunity and support for fostering youths' critical consciousness, less is understood about how marginalized youth recognize and make sense of oppression within the context of their lived experience. As critical reflection

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describes how marginalized people "read their world," it makes sense that critical consciousness develops within the specific contexts that shape and constrain individual lives (Diemer et al., 2015; Freire, 2000). Lower income, racial/ethnic minority youth are embedded in intersecting systems of oppression that foster inequities across multiple domains including class, race, and gender (Carmen et al., 2015). Therefore, critical consciousness is likely not only to vary across people, but also as a function of the specific types of marginalization that people experience (Diemer et al., 2015). For example, a youth who has grown up in extreme poverty may be more frequently exposed, as well as more attuned, to socioeconomic disparities while a youth who experiences violence in her daily life may be more aware of the unequal distribution of supports for neighborhood safety within a city (Bennett, et al., 2007; Boslaugh, et al., 2004). For example, in a recent multi-level, health-related survey of adults living in St. Louis, African American residents' ratings of neighborhood safety were much more closely tied to higher versus lower levels of neighborhood segregation than were white residents' ratings (Bosloaugh et al., 2004). Similarly, Diemer and colleagues (2006) found individuals' experiences to be reflected in the written vignettes of low-income, youth of color such that discussions of sexism and gender inequity were much less sophisticated among males compared to females. To extend this emerging body of research, we examine Chicago students' critical thinking about the social issues that matter to them.

Youths' individual experiences with inequality and oppression may also differentially affect their likelihood of engaging in critical action. Some previous research has suggested that lower socioeconomic status (SES) and racial/ethnic minority youth are less likely to be civically engaged than their higher income, white peers (APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Hart & Atkins, 2004). These disparities are thought

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to be, in part, determined by disparities in access to opportunities for participation (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). At the same time, quantitative research has shown other contextual factors to also matter for youths' civic participation. Connection to one's neighborhood has been shown to be positively related to youths' rates of community involvement (Wray-Lake, Rote, Gupta, Godfrey, & Sirin, 2015) and likelihood of voting, volunteering, and helping others in the community (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009). In addition, county-level income inequality has been linked to higher rates of civic engagement particularly among low-SES and racial/ethnic minority youth (Godfrey & Cherng, 2016). Therefore, it may be that exposure to different types of contextual hardship and oppression may differentially influence youths' opportunities and motivation for critical action.

The Present Studies

The present studies use a concurrent transformative mixed-methods design (Creswell, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003) to further understanding of youth CC among a sample of low-income and predominantly racial/ethnic minority youth living in the Chicago area. We describe our design as concurrent transformative because both qualitative and quantitative data were collected during the same assessment and our research goals are grounded in the theoretical framework of CC (Creswell et al., 2003). Structured as two studies, we first use youths' responses to an open-ended prompt to explore the types of issues, with special attention paid to social justice issues, which are important to them. In study two, we use quantitative measures of youths' experiences with poverty within their households (# of years experiencing "deep poverty," perceptions of financial hardship), neighborhood income inequality (Gini index of youths' residential census tract), neighborhood poverty (% residents in poverty) and youths' reports of exposure to violence in their families and communities to predict the likelihood of their

participation in critical action behaviors. Chicago represents a particularly salient context for exploring these questions given its extremely high rates of racial/ethnic segregation and unequal distribution of poverty and violence (Quillian, 2012).

In study 1, we expect that the issues youth describe as being important to them will reflect their own experiences with poverty and community violence. We anticipate that discussions of economic hardship, violence, and prejudice/discrimination will be some of the most common issues raised. We also expect that the students in our sample will report at least moderate levels of critical action to change their worlds for the better though this question has been relatively unexplored in past research. In study 2, we anticipate that youths' experiences with poverty within their households, neighborhood income inequality (Gini index of youths' residential census tract), neighborhood poverty, and reports of exposure to violence will be related to likelihood of engaging in critical action behaviors. Keeping with findings from previous research, we predict that youth who have greater exposure to poverty (both household and neighborhood), report greater financial hardship and have higher levels of exposure to violence will be less likely to engage in critical action, while youth exposed to higher levels of neighborhood income inequality will be more likely.

Study 1: Methods

Sample

We capitalize on longitudinal data (collected at five waves between 2004 and 2016) from a sample of predominantly African American and Latino adolescents living largely in high-poverty, Chicago neighborhoods. Youth were originally recruited into the Chicago School Readiness Project (CSRP) as part of a socioemotional intervention trial implemented in Chicago Head Start preschool programs in two cohorts between 2004 and 2006 (Raver et al., 2009; Raver et al., 2011).

Children and families were assessed when children were in preschool (Wave 1, N=602), kindergarten (Wave 2, N=398), third (Wave 3, N=505), fifth (Wave 4, N=491), sixth/seventh (Wave 5, N=353), and ninth/tenth (Wave 6, N = 469) grades. In waves 1-4, data collection spanned a two year period so that the two cohorts of youth were assessed when they were in the same grade; in waves 5-6 data collection took place at one point in time when the two cohorts of youth were in different grades. Data collection was conducted by a contracted survey research firm that has worked with the project for waves 4-6 of data collection. Our high rates of sample retention (78% at wave 6) are in part due to the close contact the research team maintains with families throughout the year and the targeted hiring of assessors who live and work in the same communities as participant families. Although all youth lived in Chicago at baseline, some moved outside of the city limits over the course of their lives. At wave 6, 77% of the sample lived within the city limits. Of the 23% who had moved out of the city, the majority remained within the greater Chicago area (within ~50 mile radius of Chicago). This research has been approved by New York University's Institutional Review Board as a part of the Neuroscience and Education Lab (IRB#: FY2016196).

Data used in study 1 were collected during the wave 6 assessment. As a part of the study design, only a random subsample of 232 youth were asked to respond to the open-ended reflection question as part of a short "purpose for learning" intervention (Paunesku, Walton, Romero, Smith, Yaeger, & Dweck, 2015; Yeager, Henderson, D'Mello, et al., 2014) that was delivered as part of the computerized assessment. Randomization into treatment and control conditions was determined when the computerized assessment was launched; youth responded to the open-ended prompt before receiving the intervention content. Of the 469 youth who completed the wave 6 assessment, 217 (46%) provided a response to the open-ended reflection. The majority of youth

who completed the open-ended reflection and make up the study sample for study 1 are female

(55%) and identified as being African American (67%) or Latino (24%). A small percentage of

youth are bi-racial (5%), white (4%) or described themselves as "other" (1%). On average, youth

were 15 years-old (SD = .79) at the wave 6 assessment. Averaging across all waves of data, the

average income-to-needs ratio (INR) for the sample was 0.89 (SD = 0.67), indicating that the

majority of youth lived in households whose income and family size placed them below the

national poverty line (defined as having an income-to-needs ratio equal to or less than 1) for the

majority of their lives.

Measure

Open-ended reflection. Youth were asked to read the following statement and given the

opportunity to write a short response.

> *"Sometimes the world isn't fair. And almost everyone at some time sees this and thinks the world could be better in one way or another. Some people want there to be less **prejudice**, some want less **violence** or aggression, and others want to reduce **poverty**, **pollution**, or **diseases**. People want their **neighborhoods** to be better. Other people want different kinds of changes. Think about all the issues that matter to you personally. In the box below, write a few sentences about problems that matter to you and why you think they are big problems."*

Analytic Strategy

An iterative, collaborative process was used to thematically code the open-ended responses

(N=217) (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). First, we developed codes for

recurrent themes and categories in a multi-step process. Working in collaboration with the first

author (a female, white faculty member), two undergraduate research assistants (both female,

racial/ethnic minority students) generated themes based on their read of 50 responses selected at

random from the full 217. Rather than relying on researcher-generated categories, the coders were

instructed to look for commonalities that occurred across the responses when generating their

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codes. Gaps and discrepancies in the coding frame were discussed and resolved among the three person team. After finalizing the coding frame, the first author and a third research assistant (female, white, post-BA) applied the codes to the full set of responses (N=217) with each response receiving up to three codes. Cohen's Kappa, a measure of the amount of agreement between raters on the application of sub-theme codes after adjusting for chance, was determined to be .77, which is within the acceptable guidelines for interrater reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977).

After thematic codes were applied, the two primary coders conducted a follow-up analysis by applying a second set of codes to indicate whether youths responses referenced their own experiences (e.g. *Living in the South Side of Chicago can be rough. There's violence all the time, especially when it gets nicer out.*) versus a broader societal issue (e.g. *I say equality because I think everyone should be equal not matter what their gender or skin color is.*) and whether youth expressed a desire to address the issue (e.g. *I think that if we do good things for the world…we can change the world*) versus not mentioning a desire to fix the problem. Interrater reliabilities were .76 and .70 respectively, within the acceptable range.

Study 1: Results

In developing and analyzing the open-ended reflections among the subsample of CSRP-enrolled youth who were prompted (N=217), six higher-order themes were identified, five of which had specific sub-themes embedded within them (Table 2). The six higher-order themes that youth discussed included community violence (59% of the 217 open-ended reflections included discussions of violence), prejudice and intolerance (31%), world issues (25%), economic disparities and/or a lack of opportunities to get ahead (18%), individual or interpersonal challenges (9%), and issues related to mental health and well-being (3%). In addition, an 'other' code (5%) was included for responses that could not be categorized using the other thematic codes.

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The majority of the youth described concerns that highlighted their awareness of social justice issues, conceptualized here as issues related to the unequal distribution of resources or unfair treatment of others based on specific traits. Three (community violence, prejudice and intolerance, economic disparities) of the six themes directly refer to experiences of inequality and oppression. In fact, 82% of the youth in our sample described issues that were coded as at least one of these three themes. For example, in one response which was coded as referencing both community violence and prejudice/intolerance a respondent wrote:

> *"The problems in the world that upset me are all the police brutality and the innocent killing [sic] of teen black males. These problems bother me because I feel it's unfair that we constantly fight for justice but we get nowhere."*

In another response that was coded as a discussion of economic disparities one youth wrote:

> *"The problem…that I am most upset about is how people in urban and poverty filled neighborhoods don't have the same opportunities as someone in a "wealthy" neighborhood. This upsets me because people in poverty are judged based on the way that they have to survive based on limited opportunities."*

In both of these examples, youth link their discussion of the problems that matter to them directly to societal inequality and oppression. Although in some ways this is not surprising given the wording of the open-ended prompt (i.e. a specific reference to fairness; examples of prejudice, poverty, and violence), the consistency of and the sophistication with which youth describe these issues suggests that youth are reflecting critically on the world around them.

We found that 37% of youth referenced their own experiences when describing the issues that matter to them personally. For example, one youth wrote:

> *"What I am most upset about is how me and my "people" are treated. Not all of us are treated equally. Mostly people with a better education get better jobs and careers. Over here the education is not that great but maybe if they focus on giving us a chance in life we can actually do something in this world."*

While these personal connections were made across all thematic categories, they were most common (93% of personal connections) when youth discussed issues of community violence,

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prejudice and intolerance, and economic disparities. Again, in some ways it is not surprising that youth are describing their personal experiences given that the prompt asks youth to reflect on issues that are important to them. However, what is compelling is the fact that youth are linking their perceptions of inequality and oppression directly to aspects of their own lives and the contexts that they are embedded in. The connection of one's own experience to larger issues of inequality and oppression is a cornerstone of CC; in his work with Brazilian peasants, Freire (1973, 2000) encouraged individuals to critically analyze their social condition against the backdrop of inequities in the word around them.

Youths' discussions of a desire for critical action also came through in the 217 responses to the open-ended question; 26% of the responses included a reference of critical action for social change. For example, one youth wrote:

> *"I want to help people come together and work together. I think this is a big problem because society can't get better unless the people do."*

While another stated:

> *"I want to make everyone feel important for who they are and what they can bring to the world and not where they are from and what they look like."*

As a whole these findings demonstrate that youth in our sample both perceive a need for social change and are committed to engaging in action to bring about this change.

Study 2: Methods

Sample

The data used in study 2 were also collected as a part of the CSRP. During the wave 6 assessment, a total of 461 youth completed the outcome measure of critical action behavior; this is our sample for study 2 analyses (Table 1). The majority (98%) of youth included in study 1 analyses are also included in study 2. The youth included in the sample for study 2 are 54% female

and the majority identified as being African American (68%) or Latino (25%). A small percentage of youth are bi-racial (3%), white (3%) or described themselves as "other" (1%). On average, youth were 15 years-old (SD = .81) at the wave 6 assessment. Averaging across all waves of data, the average income-to-needs ratio (INR) for the sample was 0.87 (SD = 0.65). There were no statistically significant differences between the study 1 sample and the study 2 sample on any of the variables included in the study 2 analyses. At wave 6, youth were living in 180 neighborhoods (defined here as census tracts) with on average 1.83 youth per neighborhood (SD=1.45; Range=1-9).

Measures

Our outcome measure of critical action behaviors was collected at wave 6. Two of our predictor variables, perceptions of financial hardship and exposure to violence, were also assessed at wave 6. The three remaining predictors, number of waves in deep poverty, neighborhood inequality, and neighborhood poverty were calculated by compiling data across all available waves.

Youths experiences with poverty, income inequality and violence.

Experiences of deep poverty. To quantify all CSRP-enrolled youths' experiences of deep poverty throughout their lives we first calculated families' income-to-needs ratio (INR; Moore, Daniel, Gauvin, & Dubé; 2009; Noss, 2012), at each wave of data collection based on caregivers' reports of family income and household size. An INR ratio of less than 1 is the federal cutoff for establishing poverty. To capture youths' experiences of deep poverty, or having an INR that places the family below 50% of the poverty threshold, we created a binary indicator of whether a youth's INR fell below .5 at each wave of data collection. As deep poverty status may fluctuate over time, we also summed these indicators across waves to create a measure of lifetime exposure to deep

poverty including youth who had at least four valid waves of data. On average, youth were living

in deep poverty during two waves of data collection ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.64$).

   Youth perceptions of financial hardship. During the most recent wave of data collection,

all CSRP-enrolled youth responded to four yes/no questions about how they perceived their

family's financial difficulty in the past 6 months (e.g., "Did your family not have enough money

to buy things your family needed or wanted?", "Were your parents upset or worried because they

did not have enough money to pay for things?"), drawn from the Child Food Security Survey

Module (Connell et al., 2004) and a measure of adolescents' perceptions of family economic stress

(Mistry et al., 2009). The items were averaged to create a measure of youths' perceived financial

hardship ($M = .19$, $SD = .26$).

   Neighborhood income inequality. Youths' exposure to neighborhood income inequality

was operationalized using the Gini coefficient, a measure of wealth distribution in an area,

calculated at the level of youths' residential census tract. The Gini coefficient can range from 0 to

1, where 0 indicates perfect equality (every household in an area has the same income) and 1

represents absolute inequality (one household in an area has all the income). Youths' residential

addresses (available at all waves except 5) were geocoded and census tracts were identified. Gini

indices from the American Community Survey 2006-2010 (for waves 1, 2, 3, and 4) and 2011-

2015 (for wave 6) five-year estimates (American Community Survey, 2006-2010; American

Community Survey, 2011-2015) were then matched to each youths' census tract. In order to

capture lifetime exposure to neighborhood income inequality, Gini coefficients were averaged

across waves for youth with a minimum of four waves of valid data ($M = .45$, $SD = .06$).

   Neighborhood poverty. Procedures similar to those used to construct our measure of

neighborhood income inequality were also used to calculate neighborhood poverty. Youths'

residential census tracts from every wave (with the exception of wave 5) were matched with measures of the percentage of families living below the poverty line within a census tract obtained from the American Community Survey 2006-2010 (for waves 1, 2, 3, and 4) and 2011-2015 (for wave 6) five-year estimates (American Community Survey, 2006-2010; American Community Survey, 2011-2015). Measures of neighborhood poverty at each wave were then averaged across waves for youth with a minimum of four waves of valid data ($M = 29.69$, $SD = .06$). The measure was divided by 10 to avoid small estimates

Exposure to violence. At wave 6, youth completed a version of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Brener, Collins, Kann, Warren, & Williams, 1995), which was updated to encompass challenges and strengths more likely to be experienced by adolescents. The measure contained seven yes/no items that assessed exposure to violence from adults (e.g. "Have you watched or heard fights between adults in your home?", "Have you been hit by an adult?"), other children (e.g. "Have you been hit, kicked, or hurt by another kid?") and unspecified ("Have you been in a physical fight?"). These items were recoded (0 = no, 1 = yes) and averaged to produce an aggregate of violence exposure ($M = .27$, $SD = .25$).

Critical action. All CSRP-enrolled youth responded to five yes/no items taken from the Sociopolitical Action subscale of the Critical Consciousness Scale (Diemer et al., 2014). Some items were altered slightly to make them relevant to adolescents' experiences with social media. These questions were chosen to reflect a range of sociopolitical involvement (e.g. "Have you posted on social media about a social justice or political issue?" to "Have you worked on a political campaign?") and content that was germane to current events covered on local and national news media at that time (e.g. "Have you participated in a gay rights, pro-environment or social justice group?"). Additional items included "Have you participated in a discussion about a

social or political issue, such as immigration or climate change?" and "Have you joined in a

protest march, political demonstration, or political meeting?". Questions reflected behaviors

engaged in the prior six months. Responses were recoded (0 = no, 1 = yes) and summed to create a

count of the number of critical action behaviors youth engaged in ($M = 1.15$, $SD = 1.14$).

Covariates. Participant gender (female =1), age, and race/ethnic category group

membership (Black=1 vs. other =0) were added to the model as covariates. Again, youth were

originally recruited into the larger study from which the data comes as part of a socioemotional

intervention trial implemented in Chicago Head Start preschool programs in two cohorts between

2004 and 2006 (Raver et al., 2009; Raver et al., 2011). Therefore, to adjust for study design and

baseline intervention component, indicators of study cohort and treatment condition were also

included. Lastly, to account for other census tract-level characteristics, the population (divided by

1000) of each youth's residential census tract (averaged across waves) and percent of the

population who is African American (averaged across waves) was also included. Finally, because

prior work has found youth involvement in after-school programs and community organizations to

be predictive of civic engagement (e.g. Bobek, Zaff, Li, & Lerner, 2009), we also include youths'

reports of whether they had "joined an after-school group or club" (yes/no; 62% yes) and whether

they had "volunteered in a community group or organization" (yes/no; 46% yes) as covariates in

the model.

Analytic Strategy

To test the relationship between youths' experiences with poverty, income inequality, and

violence and the likelihood of their engaging in critical action behaviors, we estimated a Poisson

regression model. A Poisson model was chosen because our outcome variable is a count of critical

action behaviors. We estimated the following model:

$$Log(Y_i) = \beta_{0i} + \beta_{1\text{-}5i} + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where Y_i, person i's count of critical action behaviors, is estimated as a function of the model

intercept (β_{0i}), youths' experiences with poverty within their households and neighborhoods,

neighborhood income inequality, and exposure to violence ($\beta_{1i\text{-}5i}$), a vector of covariates (γ_i), and

the remaining error (ε_i). Analyses were run in Mplus version 7 and the TYPE=COMPLEX

function with the CLUSTER option was used to account for the nesting of youth in census tracts.

We chose to cluster youth based on wave 1, rather than wave 6, residential census tract because

wave 1 had less missing address data and there was a greater amount of nesting of individuals

within census tracts. At wave 6, on average, study 2 participants lived in census tracts with 3

participants and over 30% of the sample were the sole participant living in their residential census

tract. Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) was used to estimate statistical parameters

from data with missing values. Therefore, our analyses include the sample of 461 with the

exception of 23 youth who were missing information on our clustering variable.

Results: Study 2

To get a sense of how many youth engaged in critical action behaviors, we first ran

descriptive statistics on our outcome variable. The majority of youth reported engaging in critical

action; 65% of youth had engaged in least one of the five behaviors asked about in the critical

action survey. A number of youth also reported engaging in multiple critical action behaviors;

31% of the sample engaged in one critical action behavior, 20% engaged in two, 20% engaged in

three, 9% engaged in four, and 1% engaged in five. Youth were most likely to have participated in

a social or political discussion (51%), followed by posting on social media (34%), joining in a

protest march, political demonstration or meeting (13%), participating in a gay rights, pro-

environment, or social justice group (12%), and working on a political campaign (6%).

The results of the Poisson regression model are presented in Table 3. We found exposure to violence ($B = .35$, $SE = .16$, $IRR = 1.42$, $p = .03$) to be related to critical action such that higher rates of exposure to violence were related to a greater likelihood of engaging in more critical action behaviors. Neighborhood income inequality ($B = 1.89$, $SE = 1.10$, $IRR = 6.62$, $p = .09$) was also predictive at the trend level; higher levels of income inequality were marginally related to a greater likelihood of engaging in more critical action behaviors.

Discussion

In the face of high levels of community violence and rising levels of income inequality in the United States, what do low-income, racial/ethnic minority youth who live in Chicago view as the most pressing problems in their communities and daily lives? How socio-politically active are these youth in working to make their communities stronger in the face of those societal problems? This study begins to offer insight into these questions using thoughts provided by a sample of 13- to 17-year-olds (who have been part of the current study since they were in preschool) who generously shared their reflections on the issues that are important to them. Analyses of youths' open-ended reflections revealed that the adolescents in our study are concerned by issues of inequality and oppression; many of the students in our sample offered critical reflections on (and rejection of) the unfairness of racial prejudice, police brutality, and limited educational and economic opportunity in their communities when asked to talk about social problems that matter to them. These reflections stand in stark contrast to media and scholarly representations of adolescents as socially and politically unaware or uninvolved. Granted, one significant limitation of this study is that students discussed their concerns in response to a brief prompt that explicitly highlighted ways that the "world isn't fair" before asking them to think and write about "all the issues that matter to you personally." Even with that caveat in mind, it is worth noting that some

of the youth in our study spontaneously extended their analyses to include structural causes of the problems they perceived (e.g. *Mostly people with a better education get better jobs and careers. Over here the education is not that great*) as well as ways that critical action on their own and others' parts could lead to change for a better world (e.g. *I want to make everyone feel important for who they are and what they can bring to the world and not where they are from and what they look like*).

We also found that a number of youth (37%) referenced their own experiences when describing the issues that matter to them personally and the vast majority of these personal connections (93%) were made in the context of discussions of community violence, prejudice and intolerance, and economic disparities. Critical conciousness is grounded in Freire's work with Brazilian peasants where CC was used as a tool to promote literacy and sociopolitical engagement (1973, 2000). In his thinking, CC is the process by which oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and in turn, act to change them. As such, the connections that youth in our sample (lower income, predominantly racial/ethnic minority) make between their own lived experiences and their discussions of inequality and oppression exemplify the construct of critical reflection. It is important to recognize that not mentioning a personal experience in ones' comment does not suggest that youth are not capable of critical reflection or that the comment itself does not embody critical reflection. Rather, we highlight youths' use of personal connection in the discussion of the issues that matter to them as an example of ways that youths' daily experiences with poverty, inequality, and violence get reflected in their perceptions of the world around them.

Our quantitative analyses of youths' participation in five types of critical action supported the qualitative portrait of these adolescents as not only socially concerned but also socio-

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politically active. The majority of youth in our study (65%) had engaged in at least one type of sociopolitical activity (e.g. posted on social media about a social justice or political issue, or participated in a group focused on issues of social justice, gay rights, or environmental protection, worked on a political campaign). Youths' rates of participation in specific activities are on par with, or slightly lower than, rates found with samples similar in age and demographic characteristics (Diemer et al., 2017; Malin, Han, & Liauw, 2017). For example, 23.3% and 38.7% of the youth in the respective Diemer and Malin samples reported joining in a protest march, political demonstration, or political meeting compared with 12.8% of our sample. In contrast, 51% of the youth in our sample had participated in a discussion about a social or political issue compared with 52.6% and 42.3% of the Diemer and Malin samples. The slightly lower response values in our sample may be due in part to the shorter participation period used in our measure (6 months) relative to the Diemer (one year) and Malin (since you started high school) samples.

It is important to highlight that the youth in this study engaged in this level of critical action while also managing major stressors and responsibilities in their lives; on average, youth were living in deep poverty (at 50% of the federal poverty threshold) for at least 2 out of the 6 time points that they were interviewed across childhood and experiencing moderate to high levels of neighborhood income inequality (as measured by Gini coefficient indices) throughout their childhoods. In addition, a substantial number of the youth in our study reported exposure to significant financial hardship and to one or more incidences of violence in their homes or communities. Although not unexpected given the historical and theoretical groundings of critical consciousness as a tool for social change among marginalized populations, it is still powerful and impressive to recognize that youths' critical reflections and actions are made against this backdrop of stressors.

We also found evidence that youths' family and neighborhood contexts played an important predictive role for their engagement in sociopolitical action. Students facing higher levels of exposure to violence were more likely to engage in **more** critical actions such as participating in a political campaign or a group fighting for social justice. In addition, students exposed to higher levels of neighborhood income inequality were more marginally more likely to engage in more critical action. It is important to highlight that neighborhood income inequality is marginally predictive of critical action behaviors independent of household- and neighborhood-poverty. Neighborhood income inequality is a measure of unequal resource distribution across a geographic area while measure of household and neighborhood capture absolute levels of deprivation. Therefore, it may be that experiences that highlight inequity across individuals or groups may play a role in motivating youths' participation in social action. In addition, these relationships were found after adjusting models for youth's participation in after-school programs and community organizations, which have been shown to be powerful predictors of civic engagement. Our findings shed a bright light on the value of asking students not only about the emotional and behavioral problems they experience in the face of community- and family-level disadvantage, but also the numerous supports they receive, critical awareness they develop, and the actions that they take to remedy those forms of disadvantage, at both individual and structural levels (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

The findings described here highlight both the types of social issues that are important to lower income, racial/ethnic minority youth and the ways that their experiences with poverty, inequality, and violence can motivate behavior to make the world a better place. Although CC theory and scholarship has recognized that lower income, racial/ethnic minority youth are embedded in intersecting systems of oppression (e.g. Carmen et al., 2015), less attention has been

paid to understanding how youth make sense of these systems, the aspects of inequality that are most salient to them, and how experiences with specific types of oppression or inequality may differentially motivate youth to engage in behaviors to effect change. Our hope is that this work will, to a small extent, demonstrate the multiple ways that this sample of young people think about social issues and engage in social change and motivate other scholars to address this complexity in their research.

Limitations, strengths and implications for prevention and policy

Our findings are constrained by a number of methodological limitations. For example, youth were asked to share their thoughts on "problems that matter" with prompts specifically mentioning social justice issues such as poverty, violence, and prejudice. It is not clear how the students in our study would have answered in the context of other prompts or primes, such as if they had been specifically asked to reflect on themes of inequality and oppression. In addition, we did not explicitly code open-ended responses for different dimensions or levels of critical reflection, focusing instead on the thematic content of the responses. Finally, our measure of critical action includes behaviors that require varying levels of investment from youth; participating in a conversation about a social issue requires significantly less effort and initiative than participating in a protest or volunteering one's time to work on a social cause. Despite this, we feel that our measure still captures important information on the spectrum of critical action behaviors that youth are likely to be involved in. This first set of empirical steps has yielded a highly informative and thought-provoking set of findings underscoring the high level of reasoning about inequality held by youth who are often marginalized in U.S. society.

Following the rise in recent innovative scholarship on the power of adolescent "mindsets," our field has made great strides in better understanding the links between students' implicit

theories, expectancies, and values regarding academic motivation and achievement (Wang, 2012). However, we still know very little about students' beliefs, values, and expectancies regarding their motivation for engagement versus disengagement from civic participation in our nation's constitutional democracy. By asking open-ended questions and a small number of survey items tapping critical consciousness and by listening carefully to their responses, we hear these students as they speak in ways that are loud and clear; youth perceive a need for social change, feel shared responsibility with adults for bringing it about, and are taking actions to make a difference in their communities. This represents a powerful new direction in which to pursue "mindset" interventions and clinical supports for youth in under-resourced community contexts characterized by income inequality as well as racially discriminatory practices that are brutalizing and traumatic (Geller, Fagan, Tyler & Link, 2014). Deeper empirical inquiry into low-income, ethnic minority adolescents' development and expressions of critical consciousness are likely to pay tremendous dividends: It will not only strengthen developmental science but will also support us to develop powerful new prevention approaches. Those new approaches may not only lessen the burden of exposure to traumatic stressors but also further empower adolescents to be agents of change in their communities and our nation.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics for studies 1 and 2

	Study 1 (N=217)			Study 2 (N=461)		
	%	Mean (SD)	Range	%	Mean (SD)	Range
Female	55%			54%		
Race/ethnicity						
African American	67%			68%		
Latino/a	24%			25%		
Bi-racial	5%			4%		
White	4%			3%		
Other	1%			<1%		
Age		15.33 (.79)	13.30-16.96		15.32 (.81)	13.18-17.02
Income-to-needs ratio		.89 (.67)	.00-3.79		.87 (.63)	.00-3.79
Waves in deep poverty		1.88 (1.59)	0-6		1.84 (1.64)	0-6
Financial hardship		.19 (.25)	0-1		.19 (.26)	0-1
NB income inequality		.45 (.06)	.33-.60		.45 (.06)	.29-.65
NB poverty		29.61 (10.00)	3.50-71.79		29.69 (10.17)	3.50-71.79
Exposure to violence		.28 (.25)	0-1		.27 (.25)	0-1
Critical action behaviors		1.10 (1.11)	0-5		1.15 (1.14)	0-5

Note: NB = neighborhood

Table 2. *Youths' open-ended reflections thematic coding frame and frequency of response*

Theme/sub-themes	Description	Example	% of responses
Community violence			**59%**
Local violence	Includes any statements about community violence/safety, homicide, guns, and gangs	*Living in the South Side of Chicago can be rough. There's violence all the time, especially when it gets nicer out. I think it's scary and a lot of kids cannot even go outside anymore due to gang activity.*	54%
Police brutality	Specific mentions of police brutality or fear of police	*Police brutality is a huge problem because it happens everywhere at any time. Policemen (and/or women) think that they have the power to do whatever they want just because they wear a badge.*	9%
Prejudice/intolerance			**31%**
Racial/ethnic	Prejudice and/or intolerance based on race/ethnicity	*Everyone in the world looks at our Black men as nothing. They think that since they are Black they would not have anything going for themselves.*	18%
Immigrant	Prejudice and/or intolerance based on immigrant status	*The problems in the world that I am most upset about are…the amount of undocumented citizens that come to seek a better life style but are met with prejudice instead of open arms.*	2%
Gender	Prejudice and/or intolerance based on sex/gender	*I don't like the fact that men are displayed more superior than women. They get paid more, they aren't put down like women are and people make it seem like women have to do everything for the man when it shouldn't be that way.*	2%
Religious	Prejudice and/or intolerance based on religion	*The problems in the world that upset me the most is that people are still racist against all Muslims even though the Muslims that are attacking and are involved in ISIS are the ones we should be trying to stop.*	1%
General	General statements about prejudice/intolerance not tied to a specific source	*Prejudice is an issue because a lot of people tend to judge people based on their looks and not how they can better someone or what they bring to the world.*	10%
World issues			**25%**
Need for unity/peace	Broad discussions of hate, need for unity/peace	*Treating humans as any other human is a big problem because everyone wants world peace, but we can't get it if no one can think of everyone as the same as each other.*	13%
Pollution	Specific mentions of pollution/environment	*Pollution causes global warming and that causes things on earth to change like animals die and sea levels are rising.*	7%
Disease	Any mention of disease	*Cancer is a serious disease that can kill people.*	4%
Politics	Specific mentions of government and/or politics	*This government needs to work on gaining some legitimacy and electing candidates that have the potential of running a nation. Many of today's government authorities aren't completing their purposes.*	4%
Economic disparities/lack of opportunities			**18%**

Poverty	Any mention of poverty, homelessness, hunger	*Another problem would be poverty. I despise it, it's so horrible living in poverty and I would know because I'm poverty-stricken myself. Times get hard and it's very rough to even concentrate on my education knowing I might not have a meal tonight or a bill needs to be paid and my family doesn't have the money to pay for it.*	11%
Educational inequality	Discussions of challenges in accessing high-quality education	*In my opinion I feel that the biggest issue in today's society is the amount of teachers being laid off or leaving their school because of money and or issues with staff. This distracts the students' learning and does not give students the fair education they deserve!*	6%
Lack of opportunities	Any discussion of a need for opportunities for economic advancement	*I think that they should make more jobs available for teens. I say that because this would help the teens put more money in the house so that they can buy food and other things for the household.*	2%
Individual/interpersonal			**9%**
Bullying	Specific mentions of bullying	*When a person bullies another person just for fun.*	4%
Lack of motivation	Discussions of others' lack of motivation to get ahead	*Kids being oblivious to major elements of life and the world around them. Not only have many kids lost motivation to go to school and learn and strive for a rewarding profession, a lot of kids nowadays have become inhumane and careless to each other.*	3%
Need more information	Discussions of the desire to have more information or be better informed	*One problem is not being able to be warned about upcoming situations good or bad. This is a big problem because many challenges are thrown at you and you have to be ready to solve or go through them.*	3%
Mental health and well-being			**3%**
	This code includes mentions of factors related to mental health and well-being including: substance use, suicide, child abuse, depression, self-esteem, teen pregnancy, suicide	*What concerns me is how teenagers my age drink or smoke a lot because they think they're cool or if there going through something.*	
Other			**5%**
	Any other statements that do not fit under the above themes	*My problem is having to wake up so early in the morning for school.*	

Table 3. *Poverty, income inequality, and violence predicting youths' critical action behaviors*

	B	SE	IRR	
Intercept	-3.89			
Deep poverty	-.01	.03	.99	
Financial hardship	-.27	.16	.76	
NB income inequality	1.89	1.10	6.62	†
NB poverty	-.03	.06	.97	
Violence exposure	.35	.16	1.42	*
Female	.30	.09	1.35	**
Black	.18	.13	1.20	
Age	.16	.07	1.17	*
Treatment	-.13	.09	.88	
Cohort	.05	.12	1.05	
After-school program	.33	.11	1.39	**
Community org.	.44	.10	1.55	**
NB population	.04	.04	1.04	
% Black in NB	-.10	.19	.90	

Note: NB = neighborhood; ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .10$