(Re)centering Action in Critical Consciousness

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Abstract

Critical consciousness (CC) scholarship frames how more marginalized people deeply analyze, feel empowered to change, and take collective action to redress perceived inequities. These three dimensions of CC correspond to critical reflection, motivation, and action, respectively. This paper aims to re-center action in CC scholarship, given the disproportionate attention that has been paid to reflection. To achieve this aim, this paper (a) reviews empirical associations between critical action and positive developmental consequences among more marginalized youth (b) highlights promising practices to foster critical action, and (c) notes open questions and key areas for future inquiry. Our hope is that this paper serves as a call to action, to re-center critical action in CC scholarship, policy, and practice.

(Re)centering Action in Critical Consciousness

Young people mobilizing, engaging, and leading social justice efforts, or youth involvement in critical action, is nothing new. Youth have historically served on the leading edge of activism and social change, such as Black youth activism (e.g., marches, sit-ins, demonstrations) during the 1960s and 70s. A recent uptick in scholarly attention paid to critical action (e.g., Heberle, Rapa & Farago, in press; Hope, Velez, Offidani-Bertrand, Keels & Durkee, 2018) coincides with increased public attention to youth activism and social change. For example, Native youth fighting for Native nations' sovereignty in the Dakota Access Pipeline, Black youth protesting the unlawful killings of unarmed Black people, Latinx youth fighting to close immigrant detention camps, and Parkland High School students mobilizing against gun violence have all received national news coverage. All of this plays out against the backdrop of our current political moment, where White supremacy remains entrenched in United States (U.S.) institutions, public discourse is more polarized, and political rhetoric is often antagonistic toward youth from historically marginalized backgrounds. This leaves marginalized youth to develop in contexts hostile to their well-being, development, and political power. It is important as ever, then, to understand how more marginalized youth take action to challenge and change inequitable contexts, in order to create a more just and equitable society.

Hereafter, we will use the phrase marginalized youth, which we define as youth marginalized by social structures on the basis of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and/or social class (Godfrey & Burson, 2018). This dichotomous framing (i.e., privileged vs marginalized) misses nuance. Youth who experience marginalization also have agency; further, people can occupy social identities marginalized by society yet also occupy other social identities that are privileged. We define "youth" as beginning with the onset of puberty and ending in the mid-20s,

when the sociocognitive capacities emerge that allow people to reflect on complex social issues, regulate emotions, and decide how to address social issues (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). Additionally, developing autonomy allows youth to become involved with information, people, and organizations that set the stage for involvement in critical action (Kirshner, 2015).

While there has been increased scholarly attention to how young people act to produce social change, the critical consciousness (CC) literature has maintained a narrow focus – the analysis of inequality (i.e., critical reflection). Yet, critical action to challenge inequitable social structures and to produce social change has been fundamental in CC scholarship since Freire's (1970) foundational articulation. Understandably, the word "consciousness," and its connotation to "consciousness raising," may (mis)lead people to conclude that CC is concerned solely with reflection, thinking and analysis. Certainly, critical reflection is a key component of CC. Yet, critical reflection is always in the service of informed action (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015) – not only armchair critique, which Freire derisively referred to as verbalism.

Rather, Freire (1970) and related formulations (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Ginwright & James, 2002) centrally concern themselves with action – collective, sustained, mobilized action to transform inequitable social structures. By fostering the capacity of people to critique and understand the possibility of transforming their world, critical reflection is a spur to action for social justice, and not the end goal of CC development. This paper aims to re-center action in CC scholarship, policy, and practice, by critiquing an overly narrow focus on reflection in the CC literature, reviewing linkages between critical action and positive developmental outcomes, and highlighting best practices in fostering and researching critical action. Notably, because the CC and related literatures are generally situated in the U.S., this leaves unanswered how these

processes function in other contexts that afford varying levels of power and privilege to more marginalized people.

Reviewing Critical Action & Its Linkages to Developmental Outcomes

Contemporary formulations (e.g., Heberle et al., 2020) divide CC into three components. Critical reflection is an awareness of both the historical and systemic ways in which oppression and inequity exist. Critical motivation is the perceived capacity and/or moral commitment to address perceived inequalities. Critical action is participation in individual or collective action to change, challenge, and contest perceived inequity.

These CC components are theorized to develop reciprocally. While Freire (1970) conceptualized reflection as a precursor to action, reciprocally, participation in action may also develop critical reflection. For example, someone who participates in a protest about disproportionality in school discipline may consequently understand the racist dynamics that sustain disproportionality in new and different ways. Freire posited the reciprocal relationship between critical reflection and critical action to be a transformative, liberating mode of unlocking human agency. Additionally, this sense of agency, or political efficacy, is believed to link critical reflection to critical action. The dynamic and developmental nature of these processes has been documented among youth and young adults of color (Bañales, Mathews, Hayat, Anyiwo & Diemer, 2020; Diemer, Rapa, Voight & McWhirter, 2016).

Critical action can be understood as a form of civic engagement, but maintains a narrower focus on challenging oppression, less concerned with traditional political participation or general community well-being (e.g., community clean-up). Critical action aims to dismantle oppressive social systems, distinct from civic and political behaviors to support established social programs, volunteerism and service (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Further, critical action

within the CC framework emphasizes critical analysis of social structures, while civic engagement does not necessarily consider analyzing systems of oppression (Shaw et al., 2014). Rather than volunteering at a soup kitchen, for example, critical action would entail collective mobilization to change housing policies that lead to homelessness, or advocating, protesting, or demonstrating for social justice for marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ people, or women (Diemer et al., in press). This focused conception of critical action as combatting systems of oppression is consistent with the root of CC theory - the liberation of all people (Freire, 1970).

Further, critical action appears to be an internal and collective resource that provides marginalized youth with the capacity to negotiate and challenge sociopolitical inequities that constrain their lives (Seider & Graves, 2020). Critical action is theorized to be a proactive method for dealing with injustices, such as interpersonal and structural forms of discrimination for more marginalized youth (Hope & Spencer, 2017). Accordingly, a number of studies have linked critical action to positive developmental outcomes among marginalized youth. For example, greater involvement in critical action across four years of high school significantly predicted Black and Latinx youths' GPA at the end of high school (Seider et al., 2019). For poor and working-class Black youth, greater involvement in critical action during high school was associated with greater career expectancies in late adolescence, which subsequently predicted occupational attainment in adulthood (Rapa, Diemer & Bañales, 2018). Critical action was associated with voting among racially diverse poor and working-class youth (Diemer & Li, 2011). Among LGTBQ and gender non-conforming youth, activism was positively associated with mental health (Frost, Fine, Torre & Cabana, 2019). Similarly, youth organizing– a form of critical action– fosters leadership skills, inclusivity of queer identities, and solidarity across racial (and other social identities) difference (Serrano et al., in press). Clay (2012) also highlighted how

youth of color fostered queer inclusivity by incorporating their experiences with homophobia into their social justice organizing; thus, illuminating the benefits of organizing for youth's identity development and intergroup skills.

Additionally, critical action has been associated with a number of community- and school-level changes. The collective action of youth organizing groups, as well as student-led coalitions, have led to changes in school policies, such as inclusion of more college preparatory courses, implementation of restorative justice courts, increases in credentialed teachers, and reductions in teacher turnover in schools with large populations of racially marginalized students (Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Seider & Graves, 2020; Warren & Mapp, 2011). In addition, youth who participate in youth participatory action research advance the broader climate of schools as they implement anti-bullying, classroom behavior monitoring, and experiential learning initiatives (Voight, 2015). At the neighborhood level, youth organizers devised a campaign to curtail sexual harassment toward women by drawing heightened awareness and developing a new reporting system for sexual harassment (Warren, Mira & Nikundiwe, 2008).

In contrast, youth activism may also have physical, psychological, and/or legal costs (Morgan & Chan, 2016) – youth might get arrested, face hostility, and/or encounter ageism by adults (Gordon & Taft, 2011). Youth activists may also face burnout or disillusionment, in the face of inevitable setbacks, as well as glacial change about inequities they care deeply about and are acting to change (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Kirshner, 2015). There is modest evidence that political activism may be associated with increased racial microaggressions, stress, and anxiety among Black college students – although these trends did not hold for Latinx students nor for Black students' levels of depression (Hope et al., 2018). In all, youth involvement in critical action appears to be associated with positive developmental outcomes. Yet, longitudinal

research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of critical action on disparate developmental domains and how social contexts may engender development when engaging in critical action.

Gathering Wood, but Striking No Matches: A Focus on Reflection

A brief critique of the field's focus on critical reflection motivates our re-centering action. While cogently arguing that "we can't think ourselves to liberation," Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) noted "the disproportionate attention given to critical social analysis as compared to action" (p. 853). Similarly, a recent review concluded: "Given the importance assigned to social action within this [CC] literature, it was surprising to see that social action was under-theorized and -reported in texts featured within this review." (p. 9-10, Pillen, McNaughton & Ward, 2020). These reviews indicate that CC scholars, as well as practitioners, have concerned themselves more with reflection than action.

Why is that the case? One explanation may be a foundational premise in CC, which is that reflection precedes action. Indeed, Freire (1970) argues that "To surmount the situation of oppression, men [sic] must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation…" (p. 31-32). It stands to reason that people would not mobilize to challenge social structures and policies that they know little about. However, it is not a given that reflection *always leads to* action (Seider & Graves, 2020). Stated another way, reflection is likely a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for youth to engage in critical action (Bañales et al., 2020; Diemer & Rapa, 2016). Another explanation is that it is easier to foster dialogue and engender critique within a classroom than to mobilize young people to protest immigration policy. Yet, reflection without action will not transform or change structural oppression (Freire, 1970). Critical action, as exemplified by youth organizing practices, requires capacities such as discussing social and political issues with peers, communicating and/or

negotiating with public officials, collectively mobilizing, and enacting coordinated protest/demonstration campaigns. These actions are more demanding than analysis and critique.

Striking Matches: Promising Policies and Practices to Promote Critical Action

A prescriptive and didactic approach to fostering critical action is antithetical to the spirit and intellectual foundation of CC (as well as related practices, such as youth organizing). Instead, programs and practices suggest broad principles, pedagogical emphases, and core practices to foster youth activism and social change. Exemplary programs – yet by no means, an exhaustive list – are reviewed here.

Seider and Graves (2020) offer clear and actionable pedagogical approaches to engage and sustain more marginalized youth in critical action. In their study of high schools centering CC pedagogies, "Community Academy" (pseudonym) students demonstrated the greatest growth in critical action across high school. They posit that these steep trajectories are due to the school's "learning by doing" model and principled commitment. Further, Community Academy places equal emphasis on oppression and *resistance* - every lesson on the forms of oppression is complemented by highlighting how marginalized communities have resisted oppression. Lastly, Community Academy supports direct engagement in action (e.g., research aimed at improving the community and writing to elected officials) as class assignments (Seider & Graves, 2020).

Mexican American Studies (MAS) provides Latinx youth with skills and contexts that promote critical action. MAS is an ethnic studies course that goes beyond celebrating culture and facilitating positive ethnic-racial identity, by encouraging students to identify, critique and challenge oppression in their communities (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette & Marx, 2014; Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Rodríguez, 2013). The subsequent dismantling of MAS by the state of Arizona (although this ban was overturned in 2017) underscored participants' ability to mobilize

youth and adults to create equitable educational spaces as well as to name and challenge the hostile contexts that youth navigate (Cabrera et al., 2013). Similarly, ethnic studies courses that infuse a critical race pedagogy stimulate youth action that advances community well-being (de los Ríos, López & Morrell, 2015).

Youth-adult partnerships can be a powerful force to develop motivation and action among more marginalized youth (Kirshner, 2015). In collaborative partnerships, young people contribute energy and passion about issues of concern, while adults contribute expertise and the wisdom gained from previous campaigns without ignoring or minimizing youth voices (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). These partnerships offer youth access to broader social networks, as well as collaborative opportunities to partner with adults on social campaigns targeting inequity, which may foster youths' capacity to resist, challenge, and contest societal inequalities (Kirshner, 2015).

Youth sometimes engage in action first, which in turn, fosters critical reflection. Youth organizing groups often recruit new participants by inviting them to collective actions. These actions can spark recognition that participants' experiences are shared with others in their community, setting the stage for critical reflection about root causes and fostering collective efficacy to challenge institutions and policies (Christens & Kirshner, 2011). One young person reflected:

> I'd never been to a march beforehand, but when I joined I started really opening my eyes up… I just believed [physical neglect] was normal for schools, this isn't really that bad. But as soon as I was seeing what happened in other schools, having multiple police officers always around, bathrooms being in terrible order, water systems not being

drinkable… I started to expand my knowledge around what's happening around the city. (McAlister & Kirkland, 2019)

Similarly, actions in youth leadership councils – formal bodies of youth that advise decision makers and officials to improve the policies and practices that shape young people, and their communities (Coro New York, 2014) – can engender critical reflection (Wilkerson & Pinedo, 2020). For example, at a convening devoted to addressing problems in students' schools, youth began to ask more critical questions about unequal district funding and how unequal allocations impact student experiences. Collectively, these studies illustrate how young people act to challenge inequality, then deeply reflect upon inequality, in an alternative sequence to the canonical notion (Freire, 1973) that people first critically reflect upon inequality before acting to change it.

Open Questions & Future Directions

Measuring Critical Action. Future research should refine critical action measures, which focus on traditional forms of activism (e.g., protesting, signing petitions, contacting public officials) but not blogging or social media engagement. Secondly, critical action measures generally assess frequency, but not the meaning, intention or quality of action(s). The need for these advances was made apparent in recent IRT analyses of the Short Critical Consciousness Scale (ShoCCS; Diemer et al., in press). Finally, initial CC inquiry was predominantly qualitative, but after a recent pendulum swing to quantitative approaches, critical action measurement (and scholarship) would be informed by qualitative and/or mixed-methods inquiry.

Critical Action among More Privileged People. CC theory was developed as a "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire, 1970). As Kirshner (2015) wrote: "people who experience the sharp edges of systemic failures ought to be leaders in collective efforts to understand and

dismantle them" (p. 5). What, then, constitutes critical action (in an orthodox sense) among more privileged people (Godfrey & Burson, 2018; Hershberg & Johnson, 2019)? For example, are more privileged people engaged in critical action if they challenge the very social structures that bestow them privilege, instead of constrain them?

Further, more privileged people can ally with more marginalized people to collectively work to dismantle oppression. For example, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, the U.S. saw many White Americans ally with Black Americans in protests aimed at police reform. For privileged people, critical reflection may be an essential precondition for critical action in allyship, because it provides an understanding of power and privilege necessary to avoid recreating hierarchies they aim to dismantle (Diemer et al., 2016). Understanding the development of allyship is an important direction in critical action research.

Critical Action as Healing. Youth activism organizations are viewed as sites for healing, connection, and well-being of young people who experience marginalization (e.g., Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Ginwright, 2010; Kirshner, 2015; Terriquez, 2015) and increasingly acknowledge the importance of self-care for sustained activism (Pastor et al., 2018). Empirical evidence also suggests that activism fosters positive mental health among marginalized youth (e.g., Frost et al., 2019). On balance, there is a need to determine the contexts and consequences of critical action to fully elucidate its impacts on disparate developmental domains.

Further, little work illuminates the mediating and/or moderating processes that may account for these linkages. One potential explanation is that by participating in critical action, youth begin to feel more agentic about their ability to change their lived conditions (Freire, 1970). In turn, this newfound agency facilitates achievement in other domains. It is also possible that engagement in critical action strengthens important competencies (e.g., social skills and self-

regulation) that transfer into other domains. Future research can clarify mechanisms to positive outcomes, which will be important for practitioners and researchers alike.

Youth activism organizations often address multiple issues and use intersectional approaches that can foster solidarity across multiple identities (Rogers, Mediratta & Shah, 2012). Terriquez (2015) describes how the intentional adoption of "coming out" language by undocumented student organizers facilitated leadership by queer youth and increased inclusivity in immigrant rights organizations. Youth engaged in neighborhood-based organizing groups in Chicago reflect on their commitment to action on issues that impact other marginalized communities – such as Latinx youth protesting police brutality against Black people and US citizen youth organizing for the rights of undocumented youth – and how such action deepens their analysis of larger systems that uphold multiple forms of oppression (Wilkerson & Pinedo, 2020).

Critical Action and Developmental Outcomes. The traditional focus on a single domain in developmental inquiry precludes understanding whether critical action may foster (for example) academic achievement (Seider et al., 2019) and/or social mobility (Rapa et al., 2018) while simultaneously exposing activists to legal, physical, or psychological costs, which may undermine mental health (Hope et al., 2018).

Moreover, while there are documented links between critical action and positive developmental outcomes, little work illuminates the mediating processes that explain these links. A potential explanation is that in participating in critical action, youth begin to feel more agentic about their ability to change their lived conditions (Freire, 1970). In turn, this newfound agency facilitates achievement in other domains. It is also possible that engagement in critical action strengthens important competencies like social skills and self-regulation which transfer into other

domains. Critical action may also connect youth with supportive adult mentors (Kirshner, 2015). Future research can clarify routes to positive outcomes which will be important for practitioners and researchers alike. We encourage scholars and practitioners to take a holistic perspective in elucidating the long-term developmental impacts of critical action. In the interim, we emphasize the importance of emotional and instrumental support for young activists (Kirshner, 2015; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

Centering Youth Voice. Consistent with youth participatory action research (Ozer, 2016), youth voice should be centered and youth given a seat at the research table to lead and co-create scholarship. Such research should privilege youths' social identities and experiences with systems of power and oppression to determine the issues youth care about, if and how they challenge them, barriers that prevent action, and individual and collective supports for critical action. For instance, Aldana and colleagues (2019) engaged in youth participatory action research to expand scholarly conceptions of what constitutes anti-racism action and create a measure of critical anti-racism action that better-captured youths' diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

This paper aims to recenter critical action in CC scholarship, given the disproportionate attention paid to critical reflection. The extant literature indicates that critical action has generally been associated with a number of positive developmental consequences among more marginalized youth. A number of promising practices to foster critical action have emerged, such as activist/resistance-informed schooling models, Ethnic Studies, youth-adult partnerships, youth organizing and youth leadership councils. Collectively, these approaches from youth work are advances in the scholarly literature that provide inroads to inform and augment policy and practice with youth. Yet, a number of open questions have not been resolved, such as refining

critical action measurement, action and allyship among more privileged people, understanding how critical action facilitates healing, and incorporating youth voice.

The importance of youth activism is underscored in our current moment by youth leading and energizing collective mobilization and protest against deep and entrenched structural racism in the U.S., as exemplified by stark racial disparities in COVID-19 and racist police violence. Thus, critical action will positively change the contexts (e.g., criminal justice, health care, schools) in which all children and young people develop. It is our hope that this work serves as a call to action, to re-center critical action in future research, practice, and policy.

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