WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT MENTORING & BUILDING YOUTHS' CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS?

While most of this resource is grounded in elder wisdom, practitioner voice, and the lived experience of those who have been building critical consciousness through mentoring relationships for decades, we felt that it would also be helpful to examine scholarly research on the topic so that it can also inform your critical mentoring work. There have been many meaningful studies over the last quarter century that have explored how young people build critical consciousness, how mentors and other caring adults can support that process, and the benefits that young people experience when they build their sociopolitical understanding and work to make the world around them a better place.

This section summarizes the relevant theory and scholarship to date on these topics — a body of work that is still somewhat in its infancy. In fact, it is important to note that there have so far been very few rigorous studies of critical mentoring concepts, with one recent research synthesis[1] noting that none of the 67 articles reviewed had used an experimental design or control group against which to compare results, which makes it challenging to determine the best ways in which adults can do critical mentoring work. Nevertheless, the critical mentoring scholarship to date offers many relevant theories and research findings that can compliment elder/practitioner wisdom and support the development of effective programs and mentoring relationships for young people.

What are the theoretical building blocks of critical mentoring?

The origins of critical mentoring go back to the seminal work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who first conceptualized the idea of critical consciousness as part of his efforts to promote literacy among the oppressed lower classes in his country.[2] He felt that developing literacy was also essential to these rural communities being able to "read" the social context of oppression they experienced — that by developing their critical thinking and critical language skills they might be able to harness the power of their collective voices and fight back in meaningful ways against their marginalization and the oppressive structures of Brazilian society.[3] It did not take long for scholars and activists around the world to see the power in Freire's ideas and to start developing programmatic experiences and interventions that could help other groups see the world around them in more accurate and complex ways so that they could also take action to break out of their cycles of oppression.

Over the years, many scholars have attempted to articulate the various components that likely build critical consciousness in individuals. While the labels and specific terms may change slightly across researchers, there is general consensus that there are four main aspects to building critical consciousness,[4] each of which research suggests develop reciprocally and in mutually reinforcing ways,[5] rather than as a linear sequence:

1. ***Critical Social Analysis*** (also known as "critical reflection"). This aspect involves individuals engaging in meaningful thought and dialogue about their experiences and how they interact with the systems and institutions, as well as the individuals in their lives. This reflection is often fueled by marginalizing experiences among individuals, such as a teacher at school committing a racial microaggression, or at the systemic level, such as housing discrimination or disproportionate contact with the police.[6] Individuals and groups often engage in critical questioning as part of reflection, seeking to understand the historical and systemic root causes of oppression rather than simply believing dominant and self-justifying false narratives that oppressive systems often promote.[7] Mentors and others may play a critical role here, as they can help young people challenge dominant narratives about both the groups they belong to and about the systems that control the world around them. This work can be done between individual mentor-youth pairings, but there may also be particular power in doing this in small groups where mentors and youth can offer affirmation and fill in missing perspectives.[8]

2. ***Collective Identification.*** This aspect refers to the individual building a sense of identity as belonging to the group and its experiences of oppression. As noted elsewhere in this resource, intersectionality is an important construct here, as youth may easily identify with some groups (e.g., being a Black youth) but may see other group identifications emerge over time or after key life events (e.g., identifying as a person with a disability after being injured in an accident). The formation of collective identity is important in building critical consciousness as it can strengthen positive feelings about both one's own self and their membership in the collective group (positive regard) and motivate action if members feel that their group is being threatened or mistreated by societal systems.[9]

3. ***Political Self-Efficacy or Motivation.*** In this component of critical consciousness, young people are moving from reflection toward action, building up their feelings so that they can go out into the world and make positive change happen. The motivation to make change can have an internal or interpersonal focus (e.g., feeling a need to confront someone over a microaggression or a growing commitment to learn more about an issue) or an external focus (e.g., the desire to participate in activism or community change efforts). It is worth noting that perceptions in inequality that result from critical reflection do not always lead to increased feelings of motivation or efficacy. Youth experiencing marginalization may feel somewhat defeated or overwhelmed as they reflect critically on their circumstances. They may also decide to take action even if they aren't sure it will be successful, with one study finding that feelings of political efficacy did not serve as a bridge between critical reflection and action.[10] In other words, youth still took action, even if they weren't sure they would be successful. But most scholars agree that to move from contemplation into actual action, young people will need to feel like they can make a difference and feel motivated to do more than just contemplate a problem.

4. ***Critical (or Sociopolitical) Action.*** Rod Watts and other leading scholars have noted that political action may be the most important aspect of critical consciousness, as this is the stage at which real world change is demanded and oppressive structures are challenged. There are three core types of action discussed in the literature on critical consciousness: 1) ***personal action*** (steps the individual does on their own, such as voting or contacting political representatives); 2) ***group action*** (such as a group of students working to change a discriminatory practice at their school); and 3) ***mass social action*** (such as participation in a large-scale protest).[11] Other scholars have included different forms of action, such as ***digital action***, which may involve participation in social media campaigns, blogging, or other activities that happen via technology rather than via in-person engagement.[12] It is important to note that the process of moving from reflection to action is a complicated one and may look rather different across individuals.[13] But we do have research that suggests that parents and peers (and likely mentors, as well), can spur the transition into action.[14]

As noted above, while these four aspects of critical consciousness may develop in nonlinear ways, they do tend to be mutually reinforcing. Participation in political action can spur the motivation to do more and build feelings of self-efficacy. Conversely, action that does not have the intended result can build opportunities for deeper reflection. Unsuccessful individual action may spur deeper engagement with groups as young people seek that collective identity and "strength in numbers." Mentors should keep in mind that young people will need support in building *all* of these aspects of their critical consciousness. They can be helpful in each of these components, especially in creating a space for youth to reflect on action taken, or in helping turn their reflection on social inequities into actionable next steps.

The other theoretical construct worth noting here is the **self-determination** theory — the belief that individuals are in control of their own destiny and have agency over their lives even in the face of oppressive systems and institutions. Studies have found that perceptions of self-determination, along with greater sociopolitical development, can be predictive of positive benefits such as higher academic performance and future expectations for educational attainment among young people experiencing marginalization.[15]

The good news is that sociopolitical development and critical consciousness tend to grow as BIPOC youth mature, suggesting that once this process starts, BIPOC youth will become more critically reflective, motivated, and active over time.[16] It is unclear to the degree that this process follows similar trajectories in White youth. In fact, one study of a youth development program found that Black youth attending low-income schools had the highest reports of critical reflection, while White youth in similar schools had the lowest and that critical reflection was *negatively* associated with perceptions of caring, connection, and character *only among White students*.[17] However, the general consensus in the literature is that White youth can certainly participate in and benefit from critical social analysis and critical action interventions, particularly as allies to more marginalized communities.

How do young people benefit from building their critical consciousness?

We know from considerable research on youth mentoring over the past three decades that mentors, both those provided through programs and those who youth form natural relationships with in everyday life, can have a profoundly positive impact on young people on just about every type of outcome imaginable — from academic achievement to career success to improved mental and physical health and reduced negative behaviors and beyond (see Raposa and colleagues, 2019, for the most recent meta-analytic summary of the impact of programmatic mentoring).[18] So, here we focus on the benefits to young people when they *build their critical consciousness*.

There is a robust body of research demonstrating that both youth development programs and educational institutions can do work with young people that builds their critical reflection, their sense of group identity, their political self-efficacy, and their undertaking of critical action (see Heberle and colleagues' recent literature review for a deep discussion of relevant studies).[19] The research literature offers many examples of how parents, teachers, counselors, after-school staff, mentors, and other caring adults can effectively build the critical consciousness of students, youth program participants, and even young people who have built their mentoring relationships naturally with adults in their community.

There is also a growing body of research highlighting the positive changes youth experience when we teach them to view the world with critical eyes. Here we reference just a few of the studies that have shown positive associations between critical consciousness and positive youth outcomes in the areas of:

- **Community Engagement —** Studies have found that critical consciousness fosters community engagement, and that community engagement can, in turn, support critical reflection and action.[20, 21] Studies have also found associations between critical action (engagement) in adolescence and community participation into adulthood, suggesting that when we teach young people to use their voice to bring about change, we are creating lifelong engaged adults who will be part of building positive communities and work to address systemic barriers.[22]

- **Career Development and Occupational Expectations and Attainment —** Multiple studies have identified positive relationships between critical action or sociopolitical development and career-related outcomes, including career expectations, career decision-making, views on the importance of work, and career attainment.[23, 24, 25, 26]

- **Socioemotional Thriving —** Several studies have identified links between critical consciousness and positive youth development, including gains in resilience, leadership skills, mental health, and a positive sense of self, particularly for youth of color.[27, 28, 29]

- **Academic Achievement and Attainment —** Multiple studies have shown associations between critical consciousness and social justice orientations and higher grades, entrance exam scores, and a decreased likelihood of dropping out of school.[30, 31] Connections have also been established between critical consciousness and academic motivation, attendance, and expectations of future academic attainment.[32, 33]

- **Civic Engagement —** There are multiple studies showing positive associations between critical consciousness and engagement in mainstream political activity such as voting.[34] It is also worth noting, however, that some studies have shown negative associations between critical perceptions of discrimination and voting for youth of color.[35]

Beyond these positive outcomes, perhaps the most important long-term outcome for BIPOC youth that emerges when they grow their critical consciousness comes in the form of the positive ***racial identity*** (and other group identities), which develops via that critical lens. Growth of critical consciousness can lead to increased ***positive regard*** and reductions in internalized negative views about one's own race. These reductions in "stereotype threat" have been correlated with academic achievement,[36] with one scholar noting that critical consciousness can be thought of as a "psychological armor" that helps young people fight off those dominant false narratives about their group[37] and inspire what has been described as an "achievement as resistance" mindset.[38]

Simply put, research suggests that mentors and other caring adults can help youth, especially BIPOC youth, build their critical consciousness, and that doing so protects them from the negative narratives our society inundates them with. In turn, this newfound critical lens, motivation to make change, and taking of critical action empowers young people to both strive for personal achievement and be involved in community-level efforts to confront the discrimination and oppression inherent in American society. Research shows us that building critical consciousness results in confident, strong young people who can thrive personally and strengthen their communities. This is the work we *must* do and an essential aspect of moving mentoring services from the realm of individual coping to addressing systemic oppression.

So how exactly do mentors (and other caring adults) support the development of critical consciousness in youth?

As noted previously, we have lots of evidence that intergenerational networks of support can build the sociopolitical awareness and action of youth. Sometimes, parents and other extended-family adults can drive this development.[39] In other cases, a mentor external to the family can actually help spur the development of sociopolitical awareness in situations where that might be viewed negatively by parents or others in the home.[40]

Thankfully, the research literature does offer a number of examples of the practices that adults often use to build critical consciousness in young people, both in and out of programs.

One study, focused on a school-based effort to build critical consciousness, found that teachers were able to effectively support critical consciousness development by 1) providing new information to students about relevant issues, 2) offering real-life examples of oppressive systems in action, and 3) helping to build new perspectives among students by engaging in critical dialogue.[41]

Similarly, one study of a diverse group of college students' relationships with natural mentors found that those mentors were most effective in building critical consciousness when they 1) engaged in dialogue and reflection with youth, 2) provided information and resources that built youth knowledge, 3) made sure that conversations were nonjudgmental, and 4) provided role modeling in the form of their own activism and civic engagement.[42]

Another review of the practice of critical consciousness building found that the use of literature and the arts were often drivers of youth's sociopolitical awakening, most often by proving new information and examples of oppression that connected to the youths' lives, and through dialogue about the art that offered open-ended questioning and challenging of biases.[43] Youth can also use art to express their experiences to others and to give voice to their emerging consciousness.

As you can probably tell from the examples above, there are some common features in how mentors and other caring adults go about building critical consciousness. This work almost always starts with the use of **discussion groups**. While this work can happen between mentor-mentee pairs, there may be a special magic that is created when groups of young people and mentors come together. Research suggests these groups are an excellent way to build critical social analysis skills, especially by engaging in critical questioning and building collective identity.[44, 45] Practitioners must be positioned to provide youth with important information and context, while also allowing young people to reach their own conclusions. Mentors should avoid simply transferring their own values to youth, but instead allow young people to develop their own interpretations and their own autonomous motivations for taking action.

Mentors can also be valuable in moving young people from critical reflection to critical action. Research suggests mentors are particularly helpful in helping youth weigh the pros and cons of acting and determining whether to engage in actions that are relatively simple or to move to activism that carries higher risk (e.g., being arrested at a protest).[46] And certainly adults can offer resources and assist with planning when young people do decide to act.

Youth participatory action research (Y-PAR) is another strategy well-represented in the research literature[47] that can help youth build critical understanding and then transition into meaningful action. This approach supports young people in identifying sources of systemic or institutional oppression, engages them in applying critical analysis and research, and then empowers them to have agency and take appropriate action in their communities. The use of techniques such as photovoice or other storytelling media are often utilized in this work. Y-PAR is an increasingly popular method for conceptualizing the goals of mentoring programs and subsequently evaluating their success on the terms that the participants themselves feel are most relevant.

What is clear looking across all of these studies is that mentors are faced with two critical tasks: **engaging young people in critical reflection/questioning** and then combining that with **supported action**. Reflection alone is not enough, and there are even hints in the literature[48] that an overemphasis on reflection, without any action that signifies agency or self-efficacy, can be somewhat harmful and leave youth feeling powerless. So, once mentors help youth see the world with new eyes, they must then help them use that gift in meaningful and empowering ways.

It is also important to note here that research is just one way of making meaning around the practices of this work (see the following section on a critique of mentoring research for more information about how we can honor more voices within and beyond research in this field). Wisdom and good practice guidance comes from many sources, and certainly the reasons to engage young people in critical consciousness building and sociopolitical action have roots that are spiritual, cultural, ethical, and grounded in humanism, love, and compassion — not in research. But across all the studies discussed here, there is a clear note that this work is tremendously helpful in the lives of youth experiencing marginalization and oppression and the mentoring field has a duty to bring this practice forward in its work, as well as in the research that supports it over time.

Endnotes

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