(Re)centering Action in Critical Consciousness

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Abstract

Scholarship on critical consciousness frames how people who are more marginalized deeply analyze, feel empowered to change, and take collective action to redress perceived inequities. These three dimensions correspond to critical reflection, motivation, and action, respectively. In this article, we aim to recenter action in scholarship on critical consciousness, given the disproportionate attention that has been paid to reflection. To achieve this aim, we review empirical associations between critical action and positive developmental consequences among more marginalized youth, highlight promising practices to foster critical action, and identify questions and key areas for inquiry. We hope this article motivates a recentering of critical action in scholarship, policy, and practice on critical consciousness.

Young people mobilizing, engaging, and leading social justice efforts, or youth's involvement in critical action, is nothing new. Historically, youth have 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 1970s. A recent uptick in scholarly attention paid to critical action (e.g., Heberle, Rapa, & Farago, 2020; 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. These efforts are occurring as White supremacy remains entrenched in 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. Therefore, it is important to understand how youth who are more marginalized act to challenge and change inequitable contexts to create a more just and equitable society.

In this article, we use the phrase marginalized youth to mean youth marginalized by social structures on the basis of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, or social class (Godfrey & Burson, 2018). This dichotomous framing (i.e., privileged versus marginalized) misses nuance. Youth who experience marginalization also have agency, and people can occupy social identities

marginalized by society as well as other social identities that are privileged. We define youth as beginning with the onset of puberty and ending in the mid-20s, when sociocognitive capacities emerge that allow people to reflect on complex social issues, regulate emotions, and decide how to address social issues (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 scholarly attention to how young people act to bring about social change has increased, the literature on critical consciousness has maintained a narrow focus on analyzing inequality (i.e., critical reflection). Yet critical action to challenge inequitable social structures and produce social change has been fundamental in scholarship on critical consciousness since Freire's (1970) foundational articulation. Understandably, the word consciousness and its connotation of consciousness raising may mislead people to conclude that critical consciousness is concerned solely with reflection, thinking, and analysis. Certainly, critical reflection is a key component of critical consciousness. But critical reflection always serves informed action (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015), not only armchair critique, which Freire derisively referred to as verbalism.

Rather, Freire (1970) and related formulations (Ginwright & James, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007) concern themselves primarily with action: collective, sustained, mobilized action to transform inequitable social structures. By fostering people's capacity to critique and understand the possibility of transforming their world, critical reflection is a spur to action for social justice, not the goal of developing critical consciousness. In this article, we aim to recenter action in scholarship, policy, and practice related to critical consciousness by critiquing an overly narrow focus on reflection in the literature, reviewing links between critical action and positive developmental outcomes, and highlighting best practices in fostering and researching critical action. Because the scholarship on critical consciousness and related literatures is generally situated in the United States, 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 and its Links to Developmental Outcomes

Contemporary formulations (e.g., Heberle et al., 2020) divide critical consciousness into three components. Critical reflection is an awareness of both the historical and systemic ways

oppression and inequity exist. Critical motivation is the perceived capacity or moral commitment to address perceived inequalities. Critical action is participation in individual or collective action to change, challenge, and contest perceived inequity.

These components are theorized to develop reciprocally. While Freire (1970) conceptualized reflection as a precursor to action, participation in action may also develop critical reflection. In other words, the relationship between reflection and action is not unidirectional; each component may facilitate the other. 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 and is less concerned with traditional political participation or general community well-being (e.g., community cleanup). Critical action aims to dismantle oppressive social systems, distinct from civic and political behaviors that support established social programs, volunteerism, and service (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Furthermore, critical action within the framework of critical consciousness emphasizes critical analysis of social structures, while civic engagement does not necessarily consider analyzing systems of oppression (Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan, & Dolan, 2014). For example, rather than involving volunteering at a soup kitchen, 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., 2020). This focused conception of critical action as combatting systems of oppression is consistent with the root of critical consciousness theory: the liberation of all people (Freire, 1970).

Furthermore, 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, several 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 youth's grade point averages 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-nonconforming youth, activism was positively associated with mental health (Frost, Fine, Torre, & Cabana, 2019). Similarly, youth organizing—a form of critical action—fostered leadership skills, inclusivity of queer identities, and solidarity across racial differences and differences related to other social identities (Serrano, 2020). Moreover, youth of color fostered queer inclusivity by incorporating their experiences with homophobia into their social justice organizing (Clay, 2012), illuminating the benefits of organizing for youth's identity development and intergroup skills.

Additionally, critical action has been associated with several community- and school-level changes. The collective action of youth organizing groups, as well as student-led coalitions, has led to changes in school policies, such as including more college-preparatory courses, implementing restorative justice courts, increasing the number of credentialed teachers, and reducing teacher turnover in schools with large populations of racially marginalized students (Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Seider & Graves, 2020; Warren & Mapp, 2011). In addition, adolescents who took part in youth participatory action research advanced the broader climate of schools as they implemented initiatives related to antibullying, monitoring classroom behavior, and experiential learning (Voight, 2015). At the neighborhood level, youth organizers devised a campaign to curtail sexual harassment of women by increasing awareness and developing a new reporting system for sexual harassment (Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008).

Youth activism may also have physical, psychological, and legal costs (Morgan & Chan, 2016). Youth might get arrested, face hostility, or encounter ageism from adults (Gordon & Taft, 2011). Youth activists may also face burnout or disillusionment in the face of inevitable setbacks, as well as glacial change in inequities they care deeply about and are acting to change

(Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Kirshner, 2015). Modest evidence suggests that political activism may be associated with increased racial microaggressions, stress, and anxiety among Black college students, although activism did not have the same associations for Latinx students or Black students' levels of depression (Hope et al., 2018). In all, youth involvement in critical action appears to be associated with positive developmental outcomes. However, longitudinal research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of critical action on disparate developmental domains and to learn how social contexts may facilitate development when youth engage 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 recentering action. While cogently arguing that "we can't think ourselves to liberation," Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015, p. 853) 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 [critical consciousness] literature, it was surprising to see that social action was under-theorized and -reported in texts featured within this review" (Pillen, McNaughton, & Ward, 2020, pp. 9-10). These reviews indicate that scholars of critical consciousness, as well as practitioners, have been concerned more with reflection than action.

Why? One explanation may be a foundational premise in critical consciousness 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…" (pp. 31-32). It stands to reason that people would not mobilize to challenge social structures and policies about which they know little. However, it is not a given that reflection always leads to action (Seider & Graves, 2020). Stated another way, reflection is likely a necessary but insufficient 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 in 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 or negotiating

with public officials, mobilizing collectively, and enacting coordinated protests and 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 critical consciousness (as well as to 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. Here, we review a few exemplary programs (this is not an exhaustive list).

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 offering critical consciousness pedagogies, students at Community Academy (a pseudonym) demonstrated the greatest growth in critical action, compared to students at the other schools studied, across high school. These steep trajectories may be due to the school's learning-by-doing model and principled commitment. Furthermore, Community Academy emphasizes oppression and resistance equally: Every lesson on forms of oppression is complemented by discussion highlighting how marginalized communities have resisted oppression. Lastly, Community Academy features as class assignments direct engagement in action (e.g., research aimed at improving the community, writing to elected officials; Seider & Graves, 2020).

Other research had demonstrated that Mexican American studies classes provide Latinx youth with skills and contexts that promote critical action. These classes are ethnic studies courses that go beyond celebrating culture and facilitating positive ethnic-racial identity by encouraging students to identify, critique, and challenge oppression in their communities (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Rodríguez, 2013; Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014). The dismantling of Mexican American studies programs by the state of Arizona (although the ban was overturned in 2017) underscored the programs' ability to mobilize youth and adults to create equitable educational spaces, as well as to name and challenge the hostile contexts youth navigate (Cabrera et al., 2013). Similarly, ethnic studies courses that use a critical race pedagogy stimulate youth action that advances community well-being (de los Ríos, López & Morrell, 2015).

Partnerships between youth and adults 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 wisdom gained from previous campaigns without ignoring or minimizing youth's voices (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). These partnerships offer youth access to broader social networks, as well as opportunities to partner with adults on social campaigns targeting inequity, which may foster youth's capacity to resist, challenge, and contest societal inequalities (Kirshner, 2015).

Youth sometimes engage in critical action without first deeply analyzing societal inequalities. In turn, this action fosters critical reflection. Youth organizing groups often recruit new participants by inviting them to collective actions. These actions can spark participants' recognition that they share experiences with others in their community, setting the stage for critical reflection on the root causes of inequality and fostering collective efficacy to challenge institutions and policies (Christens & Kirshner, 2011). As 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, n.p.)

Similarly, actions in youth leadership councils—formal bodies of youth that advise decision makers and other officials to improve the policies and practices that shape young people and their communities—can engender critical reflection (Wilkerson & Pinedo, 2020). For example, at a meeting to address students' problems in schools, youth began to ask critical questions about district funding and how unequal allocations affect students' experiences (Wilkerson & Pinedo, 2020). Collectively, the previously mentioned studies illustrate how young people act to challenge inequality, then deeply reflect upon inequality, as an alternative to the canonical notion (Freire, 1973) that people critically reflect on inequality before acting to change it.

Questions and Directions

Measuring Critical Action

Researchers should refine measures of critical action, which focus on traditional forms of activism (e.g., protesting, signing petitions, contacting public officials), not blogging or engaging with social media. Critical action measures generally assess the frequency, but not the meaning, intention, or quality of actions. Recent analyses (using Item Response Theory) of the Short Critical Consciousness Scale (Diemer et al., 2020) underscore the need to include social media engagement and the meaning of actions. Moreover, initial research on critical consciousness was predominantly qualitative, but more recent research has favored quantitative approaches. Furthermore, critical action measurement (and scholarship) would be better informed by additional qualitative or mixed-methods inquiry.

Critical Action Among More Privileged People

Critical consciousness theory was developed as a "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire, 1970, p. 48). As Kirshner (2015) wrote: "[P]eople 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?

Furthermore, more privileged people can ally with more marginalized people to work collectively to dismantle oppression. For example, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, many White Americans in the United States allied 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 privileged people seek to dismantle (Diemer et al., 2016). Understanding the development of allyship is an important direction in research on critical action.

Critical Action as Healing

Organizations involved with youth activism are viewed as places for healing, connection, and well-being of young people who experience marginalization (e.g., Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Ginwright, 2010; Terriquez, 2015); increasingly, these groups also acknowledge the

importance of self-care for sustained activism (Kirshner, 2015). Empirical evidence suggests that activism fosters positive mental health among marginalized youth (e.g., Frost et al., 2019). On balance, we need to determine the contexts and consequences of critical action to fully elucidate its impacts on disparate developmental domains.

Furthermore, few studies have illuminated the mediating or moderating processes that may account for these links. One potential explanation is that by participating in critical action, youth begin to feel more agentic about their ability to change the conditions of their lives (Freire, 1970). In turn, this newfound agency facilitates achievement in other domains. Engaging in critical action may also strengthen important competencies (e.g., social skills, self-regulation) that transfer to other domains. Researchers can clarify mechanisms that lead to positive outcomes, which can inform both practitioners and researchers.

Organizations involved in youth activism often address many issues and use intersectional approaches that can foster solidarity across many identities (Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012). For example, the intentional adoption of coming-out language by undocumented student organizers facilitated leadership by queer youth and increased inclusivity in immigrant rights organizations (Terriquez, 2015). Youth engaged in neighborhood-based organizing groups in Chicago reflected on their commitment to action on issues that affect other marginalized communities (e.g., Latinx youth protesting police brutality against Black people, U.S.-citizen youth organizing for the rights of undocumented youth) and how such action deepens their analysis of larger systems that uphold many 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 positive outcomes (e.g., academic achievement; Seider et al., 2019, 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, as noted earlier, few studies have examined the processes, such as agency (Freire, 1970), that may mediate the link between critical action and positive developmental outcomes in various domains. By participating in critical action, youth may begin to feel more agentic about their ability to change the conditions in their lives (Freire, 1970). In turn, this newfound agency may facilitate achievement in other domains. Engaging in critical action may

also strengthen important competencies like social skills and self-regulation, which transfer to other domains. Critical action may also connect youth with supportive adult mentors (Kirshner, 2015). Researchers can clarify routes to positive outcomes, which can inform both practitioners and researchers. 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 Voices

Consistent with youth participatory action research (Ozer, 2016), youth's voices should be centered and youth should be given a seat at the research table to lead and cocreate scholarship. Such research should privilege youth's 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, one study on youth participatory action sought to expand scholarly conceptions of what constitutes antiracism action, and to create a measure of critical antiracism action that captured youth's diverse perspectives more effectively (Aldana, Bañales, & Richards-Schuster, 2019).

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Conclusion

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In this article, we aimed to recenter critical action in scholarship on critical consciousness, given the disproportionate attention to critical reflection. Critical action has generally been associated with positive developmental consequences among more marginalized youth. Several promising practices to foster critical action have emerged, such as schooling models informed by activism and resistance, ethnic studies curricula, partnerships between youth and adults, youth organizing, and youth leadership councils. Collectively, these approaches advance the scholarly literature, and inform and augment policy and practice with youth. Yet several questions remain unresolved, including those related to how to measure critical action, understanding allyship among more privileged people, illuminating how critical action facilitates healing, and incorporating youth's voices.

In the current political moment, the importance of youth activism is underscored by youth leading and energizing collective mobilization and protests against deep and entrenched structural racism in the United States, as exemplified by stark racial disparities in COVID-19 cases 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. We hope this work serves as a call to action to recenter critical action in research, practice, and policy.

Authors' Note

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