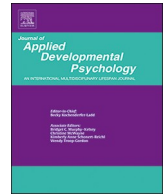




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## Commentary

## Pushing the envelope: The who, what, when, and why of critical consciousness

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Critical consciousness  
Sociopolitical development  
Marginalized youth

## ABSTRACT

Deep-seated structural racism in the U.S. has been thrown into bold relief by the racially disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and a series of highly visible police murders of Black Americans. Longstanding and inter-generational economic inequalities have been laid bare by the ensuing economic recession. This special issue's focus on how people critique, challenge, negotiate and change inequities is therefore particularly (and, unfortunately) relevant and timely. These three papers approach critical consciousness from three distinct angles. In this commentary, I will offer several points of praise for these three papers, along with a few suggestions on ways that the authors' lines of thinking could be extended or more nuanced. I will identify a few themes that cut across these three papers: (1) the importance of focusing on critical action, (2) how these papers advance our thinking on how, when, and for whom CC develops, with specific attention paid to the social identities, life phases, and events that impact CC, and (3) a deepening of our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of CC. In reviewing these three papers, I consider how each of them adds to the collective conversation about the ways that we might recognize, challenge, and work to change marginalizing systems and transform inequity to create a more just world.

## Introduction

It is my distinct pleasure to contribute this commentary to this Special Issue, *Critical Consciousness: New Directions for Understanding its Development during Adolescence*. As the Special Issue Co-Editors so clearly and powerfully articulated in their introduction (Rapa & Geldhof, 2020) this special issue is particularly aligned with the multigenerational and deeply embedded structural inequities that are punctuated in our current political moment - the widespread and collective protests of police murder of Black and Brown Americans, the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19, and the multigenerational economic inequities that were thrown into stark relief by the recession. Accordingly, this issue's focus on understanding how people - at different phases of the life course and from different social identity constellations - critique, challenge, negotiate and change these inequities is timely. I hope this Special Issue contributes to advancing our collective reckoning of, conversations about, and actions to transform these inequities in the U.S., and beyond.

The Special Issue Co-Editors have made a number of insightful points about these three papers, which I concur with but won't repeat, here. I would like to begin with considering cross-cutting themes that span the three papers, and then consider each paper, in turn. In short,

this set of papers pushes the envelope on the who (who can develop critical consciousness, or CC?), what (what can we do to measure CC succinctly?), when (when, or at what phases of the life course can CC develop?), and why (why do the antecedents and consequences of CC matter?) of CC scholarship.

The first theme that I would like to note, as well as to gently spur these authors and the field of CC scholars to not lose sight of, is a focus on critical action. To be fair, the word "consciousness" in the phrase "critical consciousness" connotes thinking, and people often interpret CC to only mean critical reflection (or, "awareness" of societal issues). A focus on reflection can also be laid at the feet of canonical CC theory, in which reflection was posited to be a necessary precursor to transformative action: "This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation." (Freire, 2000, p. 48). Similarly, it stands to reason that people are unlikely to engage in individual or collective action to contest inequality(ies) that they have not thought about very much. In short, its reasonable to emphasize critical reflection. Yet, the CC field has been criticized for emphasizing reflection at the expense of action (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Indeed, armchair activism or "verbalism" (Freire, 2000, p. 87) is not the end goal of CC and is ill-suited to our current

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moment.

However, the Tyler et al. paper (2020) helps to illuminate another potential pathway to critical action - discrimination. Consistent with recent theoretical formulations (Anyiwo, Bañales, Rowley, Watkins, & Richards-Schuster, 2018; Mathews et al., 2019, although this latter paper linked discrimination to critical reflection) and empirical studies (Pinedo, Durkee, Diemer, & Hope, 2020), interpersonal discrimination was associated with critical action among youth of color. To be clear, this is not to advocate for increased racial discrimination in order to foster critical action. Yet, it appears that experiencing discrimination may lead some youth to link that interpersonal discrimination (which, presumably is linked to some deeper questioning of racialized mistreatment) to take action against deeper patterns of structural racism (e.g., racist policies that reinforce racial segregation and racialized opportunity gaps; Kendi, 2019).

A second theme of this special issue is advancing our thinking about how to conceptualize and measure CC. A vexing problem for contemporary CC scholarship has been more nuanced and careful consideration of for whom CC is operative. Canonical CC theory articulated CC as a “pedagogy for the oppressed,” with the core idea that people who are oppressed develop a deeper understanding of the social systems that constrain them, unlock their human agency, and take action to change the inequitable structures that limit them (Freire, 2000). Indeed, Freire's writings were quite cautionary about “the oppressor” becoming involved in the work of liberation; yet, Freire also noted that oppression dehumanized the oppressor and the oppressed (Freire, 2000, p. 46-47). Contemporary CC scholarship has generally conceptualized people who are oppressed (or, marginalized) as people of color and poor or working class people – with the modal CC empirical paper examining youth of color living in or near poverty (see Heberle, Rapa, & Farago, 2020 for a review).

Spurred (in part) by recent theoretical insights about how intersectionality theory would advance CC scholarship (Godfrey & Burson, 2018) and empirical work examining CC development among working-class White youth (Hershberg & Johnson, 2019), CC scholarship has begun to reconsider whether only marginalized people can develop CC. Further, intersectionality theory has complicated an overly simplistic dichotomous conception of marginalized vs. not marginalized. Instead, intersectionality leads us to consider the complex constellation of social identities any one person holds – some of those identities are afforded more privilege by society, and other identities are subjected to more marginalization by society. Accordingly, a more nuanced conception is that we can think of people as more marginalized or more privileged. (There is no “litmus test” to simply classify someone as marginalized or not marginalized; this is a continuum and not a dichotomy.)

Yet, this more nuanced conception of more marginalized vs more privileged complicates this canonical idea from CC theory – that it is a theory for the oppressed – and raises a number of open questions. Is it that CC is more relevant for someone, the more their social identities engender more marginalization (as evidenced in Diemer et al., 2010)? Do more privileged people (e.g., White people) truly develop CC, if they critique and challenge how *other* people are oppressed in a way that perpetuates their own privilege, instead of critiquing and challenging the social systems that constrain them (a core idea in CC theory)?

These and other deeper questions cannot be answered within one volume. Yet, the Tyler, Olsen, Geldhof, and Bowers (2020) empirical findings that included White participants among a broader sample of racially/ethnically diverse youth, as well as Rapa et al. (2020) establishing the measurement invariance of the new CCS-S among subsamples of White youth and Youth of Color, provide nascent answers (along with Hershberg & Johnson, 2019) to questions about what CC means and how it operates among more privileged populations. More fully probing, considering, and answering these vexing questions may entail rethinking for whom CC is operative, how CC operates among more privileged populations, or other new directions.

A third theme is advancing our understanding of the antecedents

and consequences of CC. In particular, the Bowers, Winburn, Sandoval, and Clanton (2020) paper provides important empirical evidence that links CC to PYD. This kind of empirical foundation helps to open doors for youth organizing, youth-adult partnership, and other youth-facing organizations in that it helps these (often grassroots and underfunded) organizations compete for support from a broader range of funders. That is, the number of foundations who explicitly support youth organizing and youth activist groups is relatively small. In contrast, the number of foundations interested in fostering PYD – particularly among more marginalized youth – is quite large. Helping to make the (empirical) case that CC is something this broader range of foundations should support is one way in which “ivory tower” research supports the work of youth activists, and related organizations, on the ground. Similarly, the Tyler et al. (2020) findings also advance our understanding of the antecedents of CC by linking interpersonal discrimination to critical action.

Further, Bowers et al. (2020) identify an important moderating mechanism, suggesting that critical reflection may provide a source of agency to critique and negotiate an inequitable world when adult mentorship is limited/lacking. That is, that critical reflection may serve as an internal resource that may offset or “buffer” the negative consequences of low-quality mentoring on PYD. Although there is a potential danger in centering individual traits, in that it leaves marginalizing systems in the background and/or decontextualized (see Godfrey & Burson, 2018), empirically identifying that critical reflection may offset the adverse consequences of poor mentoring is an important contribution. Conversely, it underscores the importance of adult support and relatedness in youth-facing organizations targeting youths' CC (see also Terriquez, 2015), in order to also engender PYD among youth who are constrained by marginalizing social systems.

Having noted some of the ways in which these three fine papers cohere, I would like to discuss each of them, in turn. For each paper, I offer a number of points of praise, as well as some gentle nudges of things to consider.

### Development and initial validation of the short critical consciousness scale (CCS-S)

Less than a decade ago, most scholars believed it was impossible, or inappropriate, to measure a phenomenon as nuanced and complex as CC with Likert-type survey items. A few short years later, the literature now includes a number of CC measures (as reviewed in Diemer, McWhirter, Ozer, & Rapa, 2015; Heberle et al., 2020) and with this publication, a short version of the existing Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS), the CCS-S (Rapa et al., 2020).

Rapa et al. (2020) are to be applauded for the large sample sizes in each study, the use of advanced analytic techniques, replicating their own work with a second and separate sample, and rigorously probing and testing measurement invariance across social identity categories (i.e., ethnic/racial identity, gender, and age). Broadly, this provides further construct validity evidence for this measure and for the notion of measuring CC with Likert-type survey items. Specifically, the CCS-S is a contribution because a shorter measure takes less time to administer and score, is less costly, and may improve data quality (because a shorter scale is less onerous for respondents). The inclusion and validation of a critical motivation subscale addresses this omission from the original CCS, and now affords the capacity to measure all three theorized dimensions of CC. The authors make a clear and compelling argument about the need for one scale to measure each of the three dimensions of CC, and the limitations of previous measures in not doing so.

Further, rigorously measuring CC across different phases of the life course in this study helps to rebut a longstanding critique of CC scholarship - that adolescents, much less children, lack the developmental capacities (e.g., formal operational thought, capacity for abstract thinking, etc.) to develop CC. Although this particular line of critique

has become less prevalent as the CC literature has coalesced, the empirical findings that the CCS-S is measured similarly and means the same thing for younger vs older children, is important empirical evidence that substantiates the ontogenesis of CC among children – and that it can be measured among children.

In terms of limitations and future directions, to speak plainly, my view is that not using Item Response Theory (IRT) methods to streamline the long-form CCS, with these large and diverse samples, is a missed opportunity. Certainly, using substantive criteria to select items is important – yet *empirical* criteria to also guide retention of items for the CCS-S were not leveraged. For example, one affordance of IRT not provided by factor analytic approaches is “information,” or how precisely an item measures the construct it purports to across different levels of that construct (De Ayala, 2013). In this case, IRT would illuminate how precisely the CCS-S items measure each dimension of CC across different levels of that construct (i.e., critical reflection, motivation, or action). The factor analytic approach pursued here, in contrast, assumes that each item measures each dimension of CC equally well, regardless of whether the respondent has lower or higher levels of CC. With the objective of streamlining a longer measure, then, IRT has unique affordances in identifying “low information” or redundant items, and how well the set of items that make up a subscale function across different levels of that underlying latent construct.

With all this said, sometimes a simpler and more complicated analytic procedure lead to the same outcome (i.e., the CCS-S items might be the same if identified via factor analytic or IRT methods). Yet, we don't know how well the CCS-S functions across participants high vs low in each of the three measured dimensions of CC or whether these items are the most informative set of items to comprise a brief scale. Similarly, although no one paper can do everything, subsequent innovations in CC measurement could also consider cognitive interviews with young people, in order to further how items capture what young people view as important.

Secondly, and as the authors note, however, neither the long-form CCS or the CCS-S fully captures intersectionality, in that neither captures the unique forms of marginalization specific to intersectional identity categories. For example, NiCole Buchanan's (2005) Racialized Sexual Harassment Scale specifically assesses the unique forms of interpersonal discrimination Black women face – which are distinct from, and not the sum of, marginalization on the basis of being Black or being a woman. Further integrating intersectional perspectives in what CC means, and how it is measured, particularly among young people, remains terrain that CC scholarship has incompletely explored (Godfrey & Burson, 2018). However, probing and establishing measurement invariance in this paper, in addition to the ideas posited about testing for how the measure functions across different social identity combinations, are a clear strength and certainly an important step in this direction.

### **Critical consciousness in late adolescence: understanding if, how, and why youth act**

Earlier in this essay I emphasized the strengths of this paper, for its focus on action as well as for its work to identify mechanisms that foster action. Further, the use of the Stanford Civic Purpose Study to examine these questions is innovative, as is the mixed-methods approach. I also appreciated the authors' clear and forthright statements of self-reflexivity. Another contribution of this paper is its mapping of the contours of CC during late adolescence, which expands our understanding of how CC operates at different phases of the life course. The conceptualization of marginalizing systems, and naming them explicitly as well as specifically articulating how they operate to limit opportunity, and full humanity, was also a clear strength. Finally, the finding (p. 28, “Discrimination was significantly and positively associated with critical reflection and with all three types of action”) is important, and I would like to underscore its importance for the field and its connection to

conceptual (Anyiwo et al., 2018) and empirical (Pinedo et al., 2020) work also linking discrimination to critical action.

Interestingly, critical reflection was not associated with any of the three types of action in this paper. As the authors note, this stands in contrast to canonical CC theory and a number of empirical studies. Perhaps this is due to how action was measured – as the authors note, only a few of the items are explicitly critical or social-justice oriented forms of action (e.g., measuring collective protest behavior). Statistically, I would suggest that the very modest associations in the ‘b path’ of the mediation model (i.e., the weak paths from critical reflection to each of the three forms of action) may account for the non-significant mediating relations between discrimination, reflection, and action.

I would like to also elaborate on two Limitations the authors have already noted, and suggest one alternative specification for future research.

Firstly, and as the authors note, discrimination is only measured by one item, and the source of discrimination is unclear (the item reads “[were you] discriminated against for any reason”). This framing is inclusive of disparate sources of discrimination, yet also is not specific to racial discrimination. This leaves open the possibility of measuring White respondents endorsing discrimination because of “reverse racism” (or, somewhat more benignly, younger participants feeling discriminated against on the basis of age).

This also suggests, because youth from disparate racial/ethnic identity groups were included in one analytic sample, that discrimination operates in the same way across more and less racially privileged youth. As conceptualized, the study design suggests that discrimination's impacts on action are the same for White vs Black youth, for example. Although only 8% of the quantitative sample was White, this approach cannot answer whether this path (i.e., discrimination predicting action) operates differently across disparate racial/ethnic identity groups. Presumably, the strength of this relationship differs for White vs Black youth, but could not be tested. Which raises a broader question: why include a small sample of White participants in this aggregated sample?

Secondly, and this is also a Limitation the authors note, but the scope and span of the qualitative inquiry was quite diverse. (Indeed, either the quantitative or qualitative “arm” of this study could have served as a stand-alone study – and perhaps because the authors were constrained by page limits, I found myself wanting to learn more about the results of each study, as well as how they converged/diverged). At times, this entailed that the qualitative and quantitative findings could have been more fully integrated – many of the qualitative themes noted could be not be taken up in these quantitative analyses of pre-existing data. Similarly, the interpretation of each arm of the study was somewhat siloed (indeed, even the headings in the Discussion were specific to each arm). Given the richness of each study, I had hoped to learn more by the authors integrating and synthesizing some of that richness afforded by mixed-methods studies.

Finally, although the model tested was quite complex, and well thought-out, perhaps friend and/or parent civic involvement could be specified as moderator variables, instead of control variables? That is, peer or parental civic involvement could augment relations between predictor variables (e.g., critical reflection) and critical action. Future research could examine whether these contextual supports augment the impacts of antecedent variables on CC, instead of covarying them out, to build on the insights of this study while also elaborating how key contexts may contribute to the development of CC.

### **Culturally relevant strengths and positive development in high achieving youth of color**

This innovative paper connects the previously disconnected CC and PYD literatures. The focus on assets and resilience among a sample of youth who encounter a number of marginalizing systems is important,

as is linking spirituality to indices of PYD and CC. Articulating the connections of CC to PYD expands the scope and inclusiveness of PYD, a field which has been (rightly) criticized for excluding the marginalized systems that constrain youth (Ginwright & James, 2002). In turn, articulating how CC informs and expands PYD, such as notions of contribution, to incorporate how marginalized youth often “contribute” to change inequitable systems around them, is innovative and helps to make PYD theory more inclusive. More broadly, establishing empirical connections between critical reflection and PYD helps to establish the importance of CC for broader audiences, who otherwise might view CC as a niche or esoteric topic.

In particular, the specific moderating mechanism tested indicates that critical reflection may serve as an internal resource that may offset or “buffer” the negative consequences of low-quality mentoring on PYD. The interpretation that critical reflection may provide a source of agency to negotiate an inequitable world, when adult mentorship is limited/lacking, is insightful and illustrates how CC may empower marginalized youth to negotiate and challenge larger inequities. It also supports a common practice for youth organizing and related settings – that adult support and mentorship is important in the work of molding young activists (Terriquez, 2015).

I would like to make note of one passage in the paper that seemed out of character with the rest, and suggest one analytic approach to guide future inquiry. Broadly, I commend the authors for a thoughtful accounting of the Limitations this study (as any study) has. Specifically, noting high-achieving youth of color who reside in urban contexts are a ‘unique population,’ may inadvertently suggest that achievement among urban-residing youth is rare. It is more consistent with the framing of the rest of this paper to note that urban-residing youth of color face a number of marginalized systems (e.g., underfunded schools, less qualified teachers) that limit access to the building blocks of academic achievement. It also doesn't take up questions of what academic achievement means for urban-residing youth of color, the discourses surrounding achievement, and other more deep-seating issues. Framing this as individual exceptionalism runs the risk of losing sight of inequitable systems; instead, highlighting the inequity around achievement in urban contexts would seem to be more in the spirit of this paper and the special issue.

For a study centering the impact of mentors, I have one gentle critique and a suggestion for future research. The analytic sample is restricted to the subsample of youth who have an identified mentor (excluding about 20% of the full sample). Yet, I worry that restricting the sample only to those youth with a mentor might make the analytic subsample less representative in some way(s) or introduce selection issues. It also means we don't understand the experiences of youth in these programs who do not have a formal mentor – which could be an issue of the supply of mentors. For example, the characteristics of youth with a mentor and youth without a mentor may be different – perhaps the mentored youth are more/less needy, or extroverted? (Alternatively, youth without a mentor could simply be treated as ‘missing data’ on the mentor variable and included in the analyses – and imputed, along with other variables that were missing in the study). Although this might appear to be an arcane point about missing data, I note this because it has implications for our understanding of “for whom” the empirical processes tested are operative.

## Concluding comments

This set of papers contributes a number of insights regarding how CC should be measured, how it operates across different social identity categories and phases of the life course, and a clear focus on critical

action. There are a number of conceptual and methodological advances each paper contributes, and the set of papers coheres in a unique way to move CC scholarship forward. In the spirit of advancing the work of these earlier-career scholars and the CC field, I provided some gentle suggestions regarding each paper as well as noting some key issues (e.g., for whom does CC operate, how do we conceptualize CC among more privileged populations, how do we incorporate intersectionality into CC scholarship) the field is wrestling with.

My hope is that these papers contribute, in some way, to our national and global conversations regarding and reckoning with structural racism, economic opportunity – as well as how collective action and protest may bend the long arc of the universe toward justice.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare with regard to this research

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