



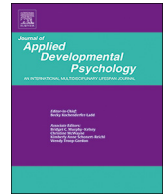
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Editorial

Critical consciousness: New directions for understanding its development during adolescence



Drawing on the foundational theory of critical consciousness developed by Paulo Freire (1973, 1968/2000), as well as more contemporary theorization about sociopolitical and critical consciousness development (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011), the articles appearing in this special issue consider critical consciousness as the dynamic interplay of three components. *Critical reflection* describes awareness and analysis of inequitable social conditions, *critical motivation* includes a commitment to creating positive social change that results in more equitable and just systems and outcomes, and *critical action* describes behaviors that support such change along with actions that directly address social inequities (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016; Freire, 1973).

There has been a proliferation of research focused on critical consciousness over the past few decades (Heberle, Rapa, & Farago, 2020). Through this scholarship, researchers and practitioners have generated new knowledge and garnered a new understanding of how critical consciousness can be measured (Diemer, McWhirter, Ozer, & Rapa, 2015), how it develops (Seider, El-Amin, & Kelly, 2020), as well as its various antecedents and associated outcomes (Heberle et al., 2020). Yet, despite this burgeoning literature and the many new insights attained, a host of important questions remain unanswered: How do the components of critical consciousness relate to one another across developmental periods and over time, both within individuals and across groups? How can the measurement of critical consciousness be improved to better account for its component parts? How can the sensitivity of the instruments used to assess critical consciousness be enhanced? How does critical consciousness, measured quantitatively, compare to individuals' perceptions and interpretations of societal inequities, as well as to the behaviors in which they engage? How do the individual components of critical consciousness—for example critical reflection about perceived inequality—manifest within particular individuals or groups, and what outcomes result? For whom and under what conditions can critical consciousness be fostered? Are there certain points in development when youth are more ready than others to engage in or exhibit critical consciousness?

This special issue draws inspiration from such questions, focusing specifically on new directions for understanding the development of critical consciousness during adolescence. This collection of articles adds to our understanding of critical consciousness and paves the way for further inquiry to address key issues related to its measurement, development, mechanisms, precursors, and outcomes.

In the first paper, Rapa, Bolding, & Jamil, (2020) report on the development and initial validation of the Short Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS-S), a 14-item instrument that builds on previously-validated instruments (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2017; Rapa, Diemer, & Roseth, 2020). The CCS-S streamlines, but also extends previous instrumentation so that it measures each dimension of critical

consciousness. While a number critical consciousness measures have been developed in recent years (Diemer et al., 2015; Heberle et al., 2020), the CCS-S is the first to assess critical consciousness via its tripartite conceptualization (Watts et al., 2011). Rapa and colleagues (2020) also test and provide evidence supporting measurement invariance across ethnic-racial identification, age, and gender groups. Thus, this work supports the use of the CCS-S among a broad range of diverse youth.

In the second paper, Tyler et al., (2020) utilize large-scale quantitative and qualitative data, collected as part of the Stanford Civic Purpose Study (Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015), to examine how youth engage in critical consciousness in their day-to-day lives. Drawing on qualitative data, Tyler and colleagues first investigate if, how, and why youth engage in actions aimed at addressing sociopolitical inequities. Using quantitative data, the authors then examine the extent to which youths' experiences with discrimination shape their engagement in critical action and other types of prosocial and civic action. They also test how critical reflection mediates those relations. Last, the authors integrate the quantitative and qualitative strands of their study to explore areas of overlap and uniqueness. Through this integration, Tyler and colleagues provide useful insights into the benefits of considering both quantitative and qualitative data when examining youths' critical consciousness and illustrate the nuanced associations between critical consciousness' reflection and action components.

Bowers et al., (2020) provide the last empirical contribution to the issue, drawing on a positive youth development (PYD) framework (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015) to examine the interaction between individual and context among high-achieving youth of color. In particular, the authors explore how critical reflection and spirituality relate to numerous PYD outcomes and consider how these associations are moderated by non-parental adult mentors. Critical reflection, spirituality, and mentoring predicted PYD in youth of color, with spirituality providing a greater benefit for younger youth while critical reflection and mentoring had greater benefit for older youth. Influential adults clearly play important roles as socializing agents and often support critical consciousness development in youth (Heberle et al., 2020), and Bowers and colleagues provide important new evidence about the role adult mentors can play as they engage with youth who critically reflect on societal inequities.

Taken together, this collection of articles (Bowers et al., 2020; Rapa et al., 2020; Tyler et al., 2020) signals at least two new directions—or at least newly explicit directions—for scholarship that aims to deepen understanding of critical consciousness. First, these papers signal the importance of *narrowing* critical consciousness scholarship. Researchers lack a comprehensive understanding of the complex ways elements of critical consciousness co-develop and interact, and granular studies explicitly designed to unpack these associations are necessary for

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providing empirical foundations for the continued development of critical consciousness theory. Scholars must continue to carry out focused inquiry that aims to elucidate interrelations among critical consciousness components (Tyler et al., 2020) as well as further explore relations between critical consciousness and other adaptive outcomes of interest (Bowers et al., 2020; see also Heberle et al., 2020). Narrow and targeted research will add to the growing body of evidence about the role of particular socializing agents, like mentors (Bowers et al., 2020), or of specific experiences, such as discrimination (Tyler et al., 2020), in shaping youths' critical reflection, motivation, and action. That is, future critical consciousness scholarship should endeavor to advance the field through focused scholarship that provides greater nuance and depth of understanding about critical consciousness and its development.

The papers in this special issue also signal the importance of *expanding* critical consciousness scholarship. Most contemporary critical consciousness scholarship has focused on the adolescent period (Heberle et al., 2020), which is largely appropriate given the developmental trajectory of youth as they approach and move through the adolescent period (for discussion, see Bowers et al. 2020 and Tyler et al., 2020). Yet, as Bowers and colleagues (2020) suggest, despite adolescents' developing capacities to engage in critical reflection, some developmental competencies may manifest earlier for certain high-achieving youth. That is, critical consciousness development may not be uniform across individuals or throughout developmental periods. Moreover, as Rapa and colleagues (2020) demonstrate, preadolescent youth may exhibit critical consciousness, to some degree, as they develop competencies to analyze, understand, and respond to inequities they perceive in the world around them. Thus, additional knowledge about how critical consciousness develops and functions over the life course including, though not limited to, the adolescent period will strengthen the impact of critical consciousness research in applied settings.

These papers also signal the importance of expanding critical consciousness scholarship to include those who hold relatively more privileged status (Tyler et al., 2020)—an issue scholars have raised for some time (e.g., Diemer et al., 2016) but have not yet completely addressed. Finally, these papers also signal the importance of expanding critical consciousness measurement along with the methodological approaches used to study critical consciousness development and functioning (Rapa et al. 2020; Tyler et al., 2020). In sum, future critical consciousness scholarship should continue to expand in scope in order to provide a more holistic understanding of, and more comprehensive insights about, the development of critical consciousness and its association with adaptive outcomes across the life course.

When we began initial discussions to plan this special issue, we had no foresight of what the year 2020 would thrust upon us. These papers were drafted for initial presentation at a symposium organized for the 11th Biennial Meeting of the *Society for the Study of Human Development*, held in Portland, Oregon in October 2019. Just a few months after that meeting, day-to-day life throughout the world drastically changed. In December 2019, the first diagnosed cases of what has become known as COVID-19 were recorded, and the ways we engage in many of life's normative activities—education, work, travel, leisure, sport, celebration, and mourning—were altered as a result. As the disease quickly spread across the globe, we were all hoisted into the throes of a pandemic that has left millions affected, hundreds of thousands dead (thus far), and inconceivable health and economic consequences in its wake. As the disease ravages on, its effects—on individuals, families, communities, and nations—are neither fully known nor have they reached their terminus.

At the same time, day-to-day life for many Americans—particularly Black and Brown Americans, along with other Black, Indigenous, and people of color throughout the world—has long been marked by a pandemic of another kind (Healy & Searcey, 2020; see also CNN Tonight, 2020). Against the backdrop of settler colonialism,

neoliberalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, experiences with racism, classism, genderism, violence (for example, at the hands of police), and other systemic forms of marginalization and oppression have characterized normative experience for many (Causadias & Umaña-Taylor, 2018; García Coll et al., 1996; Godfrey & Burson, 2018).

Notwithstanding, there are some who recognize the extent of such disparities and who choose to rise up, take a stand, and engage in actions aimed at challenging and rectifying such inequitable and unjust social conditions. As this introduction was being written (late July/early August 2020), and in the same city where the papers in this special issue were initially presented, members of the Portland community contend with occupation by militarized federal agents as they continue in their months-long #BlackLivesMatter protest organized in response to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and many others. Meanwhile, the body of Representative John Lewis lies in state at the United States Capitol, where the late Congressman is being honored for a lifetime of service to the American people and for his tireless efforts and great sacrifices made in the name of civil rights. While Congressman Lewis' repose is, in some respects, a corporal sign of the progress, hope, and transformation that can happen when people engage in “reflection and action on the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 51), it is also a visceral reminder of the work yet to be done. No country has yet realized the equitable and just outcomes for which Rep. Lewis fought—and for which so many others, armed with critical consciousness, continue to fight.

We conclude this introduction to the special issue, just over midway through this remarkable and seemingly unrelenting year, by suggesting that critical consciousness is as important and relevant right now, at this historical moment, as it has ever been. Indeed, just as critical consciousness may support adaptive development and enhance well-being among those experiencing marginalization and oppression (Bowers et al., 2020; see also Diemer et al., 2016), so too may it be a means by which individuals, marginalized or not, come to recognize and act to change societal inequities in service of liberation for all (Rapa et al., 2020, Tyler et al., 2020).

We are grateful to the Journal's editor-in-chief, Becky Kochenderfer-Ladd, for the opportunity to develop this special issue, and we offer our sincere thanks to all who contributed to this work through the review and production processes. We are also grateful to Professor Matt Diemer, for his willingness to engage thoughtfully in this project and for his commentary on these papers, which point to new directions for understanding critical consciousness development during adolescence.

Disclosure statement

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Luke J. Rapa^{a,*}, G. John Geldhof^b

^a Department of Education and Human Development, Clemson University, Room 409-F, Gantt Circle, Clemson, SC 29634-0723, USA

^b Human Development and Family Studies, Oregon State University, 470 Waldo Hall, Corvallis, OR 97331, USA

E-mail addresses: lrappa@clemson.edu (L.J. Rapa), john.geldhof@oregonstate.edu (G.J. Geldhof).

* Corresponding author at: Department of Education and Human Development, College of Education, Clemson University, Room 409-F, Gantt Circle, Clemson, SC 29634-0723, USA.