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Thinking Ourselves to Liberation?: Advancing Sociopolitical Action in Critical Consciousness

Roderick J. Watts[1,2] · **Carlos P. Hipolito-Delgado**[3]

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Abstract Freire advanced critical consciousness as a tool for the liberation of oppressed communities. Based on his ideas, scholars of theory and practice from myriad disciplines have written about how to advance critical consciousness (CC) among oppressed peoples. We reviewed CC theory and practice articles in scholarly journals with the goal of identifying key elements of CC, advancing practice, and aligning theory with insights from practice. The most prominent elements of CC theory we found were fostering awareness of sociopolitical circumstances, encouraging critical questioning, and fostering collective identity. Surprisingly, few theorists or practitioners gave extensive attention to the community action component of critical consciousness. This led us to give this component of CC close attention and to develop a framework that describes four aspects of "sociopolitical action." We conclude with a recommendation that CC programming include targets or objectives for sociopolitical action from the outset of a project, rather than limiting CC groups to critical social analysis and problematization. Youth community organizing is a promising strategy for bridging the gap between critical social analysis and sociopolitical action. This approach calls for ongoing partnerships between career researchers and community-based, veteran activists with the expertise to help young people make the transition from insight to action.

Keywords Critical consciousness · Critical social analysis · Sociopolitical action

✉ Roderick J. Watts
rwatts@gc.cuny.edu

[1] The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY), New York, NY, USA

[2] Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, New York, NY, USA

[3] University of Colorado at Denver, Denver, CO, USA

Since the publication of Freire's (1970, 1990) two books on critical consciousness, numerous scholars and educators have extended his work by developing programs to foster critical consciousness. Critical consciousness (CC) describes the process by which oppressed and socially marginalized people critically analyze their social and economic conditions and take action to improve them (Freire 1970). Theories and definitions of CC typically describe some combination of critical social analysis, collective social identity, political self-efficacy, and actions aimed at advancing social justice (Watts et al. 2011). Except for action, all of these elements are psychological processes—important in helping people address internalized attitudes and received knowledge that influence their sense of their self and the world. However, new ideas and perspectives alone do not lead directly to changes in the material world. It takes action in the form of strategic *behavior* to advance social liberation.

We propose that at least three levels of behavioral action can be conceptualized: personal action, group action and the mass action of social movements. Historical examples include, respectively, (1) personal hunger strikes (Mizner 2013), (2) high school students who collectively engage their school officials (Kirshner 2009), and (3) mass action by multiple community organizing groups aimed at changing policing policies (Hogran 2013). Sociopolitical action, based on the definition we are offering, requires action in the spirit of these three examples. To be strategic, it must also reflect an explicit critical analysis of the targeted problem and its structural features—even if it does not have a direct impact on those features. Although, theoretically, a hunger strike by a single individual who lacks notoriety or an affiliation with any collective entity could inspire change, it is not how structural change usually occurs. This argument reflects our emphasis on structural activism directed at root causes of injustice.

In this article, we will use the term "sociopolitical action" to encompass the full spectrum of action for liberation and social justice. To gain a better understanding of the relationship between the psychological aspects of CC and sociopolitical action, we conducted a careful review of scholarly journal articles on CC theory and practice. We sought to identify similarities and differences among and between articles on theory and practice of CC in scholarly journal articles.

Models of Critical Consciousness

Since Freire (1970, 1990) introduced the terms conscientização and CC, theorists have attempted to elaborate on his ideas, by adding new elements or structure or by describing the CC development process. These models often involve stages of development, similar to racial identity development models (see Vandiver et al. 2001). For example, Gutierrez (1995) and Watts et al. (2011) includes three distinct steps or sub-processes, including some combination of the following: critical social analysis, collective identity development, political self-efficacy, and sociopolitical action. Details of their models vary, but we will provide a brief description of the sub-processes. The intention is to offer a developmental perspective on CC. In this instance, the development is within each of the sub-processes described in the

sections that follow. These sections also provide a theoretical rationale for the strategies that theorists and practitioners propose for facilitating CC development.

Critical Social Analysis

Typically critical social analysis (also known as critical reflection) is described as a recognition of social inequalities and an understanding of the unjust exercise of sociopolitical power that creates them (Hipolito-Delgado and Lee 2007). Hopper (1999) offers a definition that includes its major components:

> Learning to think critically about accepted ways of thinking and feeling, discerning the hidden interests in underlying assumptions and framing notions (whether these be class-, gender-, race/ethnicity- or sect-based). It means learning to see, in the mundane particulars of ordinary lives, how history works, how received ways of thinking and feeling serve to perpetuate existing structures of inequality (p. 13).

Freire (1990) would concur that as critical social analysis (CSA) develops, the dominant narratives reproducing socioeconomic inequality and promoting feelings of inferiority among oppressed people lose credibility. Other authors incorporate an envisioning of a more equitable society in their description of CSA (Hanna et al. 2000; Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo 2013; Moreau 1990; Watts et al. 2002).

Collective Identification

Collective identification includes feelings of solidarity, collective efficacy, and shared culture (Gutierrez 1995). It has many forms—gender, race, immigration status, sexual orientation and other characteristics. The process of collective identification entails redefining one's social identity—a reclamation or redefinition that is collectively empowering. Contributing to these changes is a sense of positive regard for one's social group and her membership in it (Cammarota 2011; Carr 2003). This sense of collectivity is also thought to inspire action or change, not only for oneself, but also for the betterment of the collective (Hipolito-Delgado and Lee 2007).

Political Self-Efficacy

The development of political self-efficacy entails a growing a sense of confidence or a motive to take action to improve one's status in society (Diemer and Bluestein 2006; Watts et al. 2011). Authors argue that feeling capable of personal and community action is essential to social change (Diemer and Bluestein 2006; Watts et al. 2011). Though this construct is not as widely discussed, it is implicit. It would explain why an individual would engage in activism and expect some success. Of course there are other motives, such as hope, which may not require a belief that success will result from participating in political action. Work by Christens et al. (2013) suggests this explanation is beginning to gain ground.

Sociopolitical Action

Typically, authors describe action as a phase of CC that follows the "problematization" processes in critical social analysis. The scope of sociopolitical action varies from model to model. Some authors argue that the ultimate goal of action is gaining full control over one's sociopolitical circumstances (Carr 2003; Gutierrez 1995). More concretely, Watts et al. (2011) describes it as the promotion of change in social and institutional policies or practices that maintain an inferior status for members of marginalized groups. As noted previously, sociopolitical action may lead more directly to systemic change, but actions at the personal or group levels contribute as well. Finally, it is worth noting that this is the sole subprocess that explicitly requires a behavioral component. These subprocesses serve as the basis upon which the descriptions of best practices in facilitating the development of CC are presented in the next section.

Exploring Critical Consciousness in Scholarly Journals

This study is based on a selection of articles on CC theory and practice from the academic journal literature in the social sciences. We conducted a literature review of scholarly journal articles that mentioned critical consciousness by name. Our decision to do so at the expense of books, unpublished manuals and other works was not based on a judgment about the quality of these materials. We do not see the content of academic journals as superior to that in other sources. We limited our review to scholarly journals in an effort to determine if and how CC had made its way to the heart of peer reviewed, academic scholarship. Many universities by policy or practice view peer reviewed empirical journal articles as the most highly regarded publications. Additionally, we sought to explore similarities and differences in how scholarly articles explicitly referring to "critical consciousness" are interpreted through theory and practices perspectives.

There is no distinct line between CC theory and practice articles in the scholarly literature. Theory articles often included examples from practice to help make the author's point.[1] Likewise, the authors of practice articles used theory to support the design of their project and the activities used to promote CC. What distinguished the practice articles and served as a basis for their classification was the author(s) decision to describe just *one* project and do so in detail. None of the theory articles took this approach, probably because the point of theory building is to create a theory that is useful beyond the circumstances of any one case.

When Theorists Speak of Practice

To identify trends in theory, a broad base of articles containing a discussion of critical consciousness theory was sought. The first step was to use the search terms

[1] To write efficiently, we sometimes use the terms "theorists" and "practitioners" to distinguish the two types of articles in this study, but this is not intended as a characterization of the authors who wrote them. The terms refer only to the article's attributes—not the orientation of its author(s).

"critical consciousness," "consciousness raising," and "fostering critical consciousness" to identify scholarly articles that discussed programs, activities, or techniques explicitly designed to foster critical consciousness in marginalized populations. Note these are not models of CC, such as those presented above, rather this literature base provided suggestions for the creation and facilitation of CC groups—psychoeducational groups designed to impart skills and foster CC in group participants. To be included in this section, the articles had to be targeted for a scholarly audience and based in a theoretical perspective—using theory and literature to argue for specific program structures, for example. We initially reviewed 30 scholarly works for the theory sections of this article. Nine were eliminated as they did not provide sufficient detail for proposed practices. A total of 21 scholarly articles were ultimately included in this review.

Despite coming from varied fields of study, the theory articles described similar techniques for promoting CC. The program structures and activities described in the theory articles entailed shared values, fostering awareness of sociopolitical circumstances, encouraging critical questioning, fostering collective identity, and taking sociopolitical action. The following is a brief review of suggested practices for each of these structures and activities.

Shared Values

The theory-based articles described a need for CC groups to establish specific philosophical values and structural components. One of the most common CC values noted by theorists was praxis. Praxis is described as the reciprocal relationship between theory and action (Akom et al. 2008; Watts et al. 2011). Praxis describes the creation of theory for the purpose of practice and the expectation that insight from practice will be used to improve theory. It is interesting to note that the practice articles (presented later in this paper) did not specifically address the notion of praxis—they just did it.

Structures

A widely agreed upon structural feature of CC practice is the small group format (Carr 2003; Freire 1970; Watts et al. 2011). Montero (2009) recommends that CC groups be structured to encourage active participation of all members and embrace contrasting opinions. Further, the emphasis of the group dialogue is horizontal communication—eliminating hierarchical structures or the presumption of expertise. The group facilitator is essential in maintaining productive group dialogue. Facilitators encourage and model critical thinking (Kohfeldt and Langhout 2012): they are neither experts nor lecturers. Their role is to engage participants and guide discussion. Theorists see a need for group facilitators to possess critical consciousness if they are to foster it in others(Campbell and MacPhail 2002; Watts et al. 2002). The facilitator also models productive non-oppressive relationships, which is particularly important when working with youth (Ginwright and Cammarota 2007).

Promoting an Awareness of Sociopolitical Circumstances

Central to the intellectual element of CC is critical social analysis (CSA). The aim of CSA development activities is to increase the CC group participants' awareness of their current sociopolitical circumstances, including: becoming aware of oppression and exclusion (Ginwright and Cammarota 2007; Montero 2009); exploring causal relationships between marginalization and sociopolitical circumstances; experiencing identity and membership in an oppressed group (Watts et al. 2011); and facilitating discussion of critical incidents that raise awareness of power differentials (Gutierrez 1995). Akom et al. (2008) stressed that when leading these conversations the facilitator needs to be explicit about sociopolitical inequities, including discrimination and bias. This involves developing a vocabulary for describing liberation and oppression.

Encouraging Critical Questioning

A major function of the CC group facilitator is to ask questions that provoke thought about current sociopolitical circumstances (Watts et al. 2002, 2011) or as Hopper (1999) said, "…the mundane particulars of ordinary lives…" (p. 13). Critical questioning refers to a specific group technique advocated by theorists. The goal of critical questioning, coaching, and "problematization" is to reveal the dominant social narratives that underlie oppression. Because they are so much a part of the everyday experience of people in oppressed communities, they often go unquestioned. Through critical social analysis, these narratives are revealed and recast as a problem that marginalized communities must resist (Montero 2009). The group facilitator guides discussion aimed at challenging the "assumed normal" (Montero 2009). As part of developing critical social analysis, theorists urge facilitators to focus on concrete examples, specifically on local and personally relevant issues (Akom et al. 2008; Ginwright and Cammarota 2007). For example, the facilitator may ask participants to role-play daily experiences or use popular media to examine daily life (Akom et al. 2008; Watts et al. 2002). This is typically followed by critical questioning to help participants understand how they are marginalized by society and how social structures perpetuate their marginalization (Kohfeldt and Langhout 2012; Montero's 2009).

Fostering Collective Identity

The goals of these activities are to create collective identity, one that inspires pride and sociopolitical action to challenge marginalization and internalized oppression. One suggested intervention is for participants to take part in culturally relevant and culturally validating education (Cammarota 2011; Gutierrez 1995; Hipolito-Delgado and Lee 2007). For communities of color, this may include ethnic studies and non-Western history courses (Hipolito-Delgado and Lee 2007). Note that this does not need to be limited to traditional scholarship and can include multimedia—music videos and films as described above.

Other authors have suggested the use of life stories and counter narratives as a means to foster collective identity and simultaneously promote critical questioning: they contend that social identity formation can help participants see beyond their personal experience. Their experience of marginalization is not random, but rooted in larger sociopolitical conditions (Carr 2003; Goodman et al. 2007). These activities also entail challenging negative stereotypes of their identity group (Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo 2013) and self-blame for circumstances stemming from the social order (Goodman et al. 2007). Montero (2009) recommended that participants make symbolic representation of their current life or their ideal life; this can take the form of story, photography, or other art forms. After that comes a discussion that encourages participants to express their beliefs, opinions, and knowledge about life events (Montero 2009).

Taking Sociopolitical Action

Though essential, critical social analysis is not an end unto itself. The goal is to inspire personal and collective action for social change (Kohfeldt and Langhout 2012). Ironically, the sociopolitical action phase received the least attention from theorists. Theorists do espouse sociopolitical action, but their focus is on CSA as a precursor to action, or as part of the larger cycle of action and reflection. Few offer practical suggestions on building the capacity for sociopolitical action.

The Practice of Critical Consciousness

When we began developing this article, we divided the work so that one of us covered theory and the other practice. The practice articles were to be reviewed for especially innovative and promising practices that were described in detail. It was only after discussion of our work—done semi-independently at first—that we noticed the disproportionate attention given CSA as compared to action engaging the problems revealed through CSA. When we agreed this was true for the theory *and* practice articles, we decided to devote special attention to sociopolitical action in the review of the practice articles. Without neglecting CSA and other elements of CC, the aim was to choose articles that represented the spectrum of action ranging from personal to collective, and with a scope of effect ranging from the confines of the CC group to structural oppression. Also of interest was the process of taking action and its many challenges.

Table 1 provides a summary of the two dimensions of sociopolitical action simplified as a two by two matrix. The examples in each of the four cells illustrate forms of sociopolitical action and outcomes. It also distinguishes personal from structural outcomes. The rows describe the agent(s) of sociopolitical action, from persons to collectives. The columns are the locus or settings of action, starting with those internal to the CC group to those that affect the external world. Internal action targets only CC group members, their facilitators, benefactors, and other allies along with the organizations they represent. External action addresses the policies and practices of structural and institutional target external to the CC group. This table is for heuristic purposes in presenting the practices articles. Although we have ordered

Table 1 Aspects and outcomes of sociopolitical action

	Internal to the CC group/allies/benefactors	External to the CC group/allies/benefactors
Personal action→	*Cell 1* As part of dialogue, an individual in the group makes a significant contribution to another's critical social analysis skills or personal development [1]	*Cell 3* An individual in the group engages and shares CSA and action strategies with external targets, and potential allies or recruits (e.g., consciousness-raising or confronting power) [3]
Collective action→	*Cell 2* CC group activities influenced views, policies or practices of their facilitators, allies, benefactors, or conveners [2]	*Cell 4* CC group members are mobilized and supported for direct action on structural issues or other shared concerns (e.g., social conditions, institutional policies, etc.) [4]

Numbers in brackets correspond to quotes in the text from the three practice articles

them from 1 to 4, these are nominal categories best seen as themes. If the four cells are rearranged as a linear series from 1 to 4, they can be viewed as a spectrum of sociopolitical action ranging from low to high impact. Cell 1, the starting point, is limited to personal action within the CC group, and thus it has a relatively short range of effect. The radiating effects from sociopolitical action in Cell 4 may have a much greater range. It has the advantage of collective effort and is aimed at structural aspects of injustice. To locate the practice articles, we conducted three searches of social science journal databases. The first search was for "critical" and "consciousness" in the title or the abstract (with no other conditions). This yielded 199 documents including dissertations. The second search substituted "program" in the abstract as a condition (this yielded 20 documents). The final search used "action" rather than "program" in the abstract (yielding 19 documents). Once duplicates were removed, we were left with 162 unduplicated items. From this pool, we considered only refereed journal articles. Many articles were excluded from the short list because they did not provide many details on practice activities, or the authors' focus was on research outcomes rather than practice processes. Of the 39 articles remaining with CC in the title and at least one other key word in the abstract (i.e., action or program), many did not explicitly discuss critical consciousness. Others grew out of non-Freirean ideas (e.g., "Awakening a Scream of Consciousness: The Critical Group in Action Research or Education for the Development of Critical Moral Consciousness"). Others were much more focused on assessing outcomes than on CC practice activities ("Effects of a Transnational Teaching Program in the Development of Cultural Critical Consciousness"). About 14 articles remained as good candidates for our review, and it was from this pool that we chose the three that best met the following criteria: (1) most of the text was devoted to information on CC program implementation and outcomes for a specific project, and authors presented it in detail; (2) the authors attended to human diversity (gender, race, social class, etc.), in the ideas presented and the participants involved; (3) variation existed among the selected articles on the notion of "sociopolitical

action"; (4) the articles had implications for youth CC interventions; and (5) the authors attended to the conceptual aspects of CC programming. We limited the review of practice articles to scholarly journals, just as we limited the theory articles. Although it would certainly be a richer review to include all books and publications that inform CC theory and practice, we had a particular interest in the extent to which the journal literature has become a resource for those who would see liberatory practice as fully bound up with the theory that informs it.

The three practice articles we chose for this review are: Foster-Fishman et al. (2010) "*Y*outh ReACT for Social Change: A Method for Youth Participatory Action Research"; Maiter et al. (2013) "Doing Participatory Qualitative Research: Development of a Shared Critical Consciousness with Racial Minority Research Advisory Group Members", and Hatcher et al. (2011) "Promoting Critical Consciousness and Social Mobilization in HIV/AIDS Programmes: Lessons and Curricular Tools from a South African Intervention." Although the emphasis is on activities rather than ideas, these practice articles are not devoid of theory. Authors with a practice focus imbed theoretical propositions within their intervention, as will be seen in the quotes below. To provide the context for the three examples of practice, we include an overview of each project as they are introduced. The bracketed numbers in Table 1 refer to quotes from the three articles that appear below. The examples shown in the cells illustrate four themes in sociopolitical action and outcomes. They also distinguish between personal and structural outcomes.

Case 1: Youth ReACT for Social Change: A Method for Youth Participatory Action Research. This article offers excellent examples of activities for fostering CSA and the dialogue associated with it. Although the dialogue does not provide direct evidence in the form of participant quotes to illustrate how group members learn from each other, there are quotes that demonstrate an understanding of CSA that could be helpful to others. Thus, it offers an example of the most common and accessible form of sociopolitical action, represented by Cell 1 in Table 1. Foster-Fishman and her university colleagues were concerned that few published instances of PAR involved youth in all phases of the work, including problem identification, analysis, intervention, and feedback. In particular, they saw few examples of involving youth in data analysis that could engage them in community affairs and contribute to their CC. Hinting that the literature did not always offer practice-friendly tools for this purpose they said "…some projects struggle to promote this awareness, often because the methods used are not well matched to the developmental needs of their participants" (p. 67). The purpose of their "ReACT Method" was to remedy this problem. Working with community organizations with whom they had collaborated for years, their aim was to foster CC among a group of local youth who "…were notably absent from most decision-making and action efforts within the community…" (p. 68). Most of the 19 young people were seventh graders from low-income urban areas. Almost half were African American and about two-thirds were girls.

As would be expected, and as seen in Foster-Fishman et al.'s quote on developmental needs, authors who focus on practice are pragmatic in their approach to CC. They focus on skill building as well as knowledge and critical thinking. Social and technical skills can be viewed as an enabling asset for CSA. For example, the authors engaged the CC group in several training exercises to ensure they had

the skills needed to fully participate in the photovoice activities. Youth received training from professional photographers and practiced their skills through simulations. Here is a brief example of how young people applied and reflected on an image:

> Youth photographer: I took a picture of the drug-free school zone sign at front of my school because I think it's important that drugs stay out of school… I know a lot of kids at my school do illegal drugs and it's sad because they shouldn't. I don't think anybody should because it kills your brain cells….

To move from reflection toward critical social analysis, facilitated dialog is often necessary:

> Facilitator 1: I'm wondering—what do you guys think makes people want to do drugs?
> Group Member 1: Influences
> Facilitator 1: Influences, what kind s of influences?
> [additional exchanges]
> Group Member 1: They hang around their cousins a lot.
> Group Member 2: …when your parents do it, it's just a bad role model for you and then your friends get you involved in that kind of stuff.

Practitioners share the richness and complexity of group dialogue that complicate theory but also often affirm it. The work of these authors follows the emphasis on the analysis of everyday life advocated by Freire (1990) and contemporary theorists Akom et al. (2008) and Ginwright and Cammarota (2007). Foster Fishman and her colleagues used a myriad of exercises and techniques to advance CSA, vividly illustrating that there is no magic bullet in this work. Photovoice and dialog were not enough; they devised activities based on common children's games such as scavenger hunts, memory games, and "Simon Says" to make the learning process more familiar and fun. Reflecting on their challenges, they noted that dialog and reflection does not automatically lead to sociopolitical insight, much less a strategy for "…*how* a community can transform itself" (emphasis in the original, p. 71).

The authors used "why" questions, recognized by theorists as an essential CC strategy for surfacing insight on the root causes of social problems (e.g., Kohfeldt and Langhout 2012). Along with their other activities, clearer evidence of an emerging CSA was more apparent:

> Facilitator: Why do you think some kids don't believe [every kid can go to college]?
> Photographer: Well, a ton of parents don't go to college or finish high school. And that means that they think they can't do it either. Like you can't choose the family you are born into. Some kid's parents might not have enough money to afford going to college [1].

The notion of problematization is apparent here and the "why" questions help transform everyday experiences into targets for change.

The CSA dialog and learning activities were not linked to the understanding of any one social issue that could be a target for sociopolitical action. In reflecting on

their accomplishments, Foster-Fishman and her colleagues also acknowledged that outcomes, though meaningful, were limited to CSA and a personal sense of self-efficacy or empowerment:

> Although our project did not include an intervention or action phase, as found in some other YPAR efforts, preliminary evidence does suggest that participating youth became more empowered through their participation, and the community is now more intentionally considering how to further engage youth. We posit that this success is due, in part, to our intentional design of a YPAR project that promoted knowledge generation and critical consciousness through problem identification, data analysis, and feedback. Participatory power can only emerge when YPAR participants have the ability to enhance local knowledge and expand both their own and the community's critical consciousness (p. 80).

Empowerment is a close relative of critical consciousness, and scholars in the field (e.g., Zimmerman) have developed a construct of "personal empowerment" that is akin to the outcomes implied by Fishman et al. above. The CSA skills young people develop in groups like theirs fall into Cell 1 of Table 1. Thus, CC training alone can be beneficial, and it can inspire young people to seek out opportunities to apply what they have learned. Yet, this article shows that without a plan or a focus on a specific community issue, future engagement in sociopolitical development is left to chance. Have they learned enough at this point to become motivated to find their own activities? It is this gap between CSA and a transition to higher levels of sociopolitical action often seen in the journal literature,

Challenges to Sociopolitical Action Phase

Academic researchers committed to participatory research often seek to consult community stakeholders in their work, and creating an advisory group is a common method for doing so. However, when researchers recruit and convene an advisory group there is a potential for awkward contradictions if not conflicts of interest. To some extent, the youth CC group Foster-Fishman, her colleagues, and their community partners created with young people hints at this. Foster-Fishman et al. describes their charge:

> We were asked by local organizational leaders and funders to design a strategy that would simultaneously heighten youth's awareness of their value within the community and of the issues facing their community as well as promote local organizations' understanding of how to best promote youth engagement. For the past 12 years we had been working in this community, most recently as the evaluators of the community change initiative (p. 69).

Contradictions can arise when the young people become empowered behaviorally as well as intellectually. What happens when youth find their voice as part of their CC experience and begin to express their interests assertively to the adults who convened the group? As Foster-Fishman and colleagues note, adults may not greet youth voice affirmatively:

> Although YPAR projects may build youth capacity, they do not necessarily build the community's ability to *work with or respond to youth* or an organization's operational capacity. Yet, YPAR projects often require communities and local organizations to behave in new ways toward youth… (p. 82, emphasis added).

Resistance to change and disruptions in organization culture is predictable response by those in power (Burke 2011). In the case of Foster-Fishman and her colleagues, the CC group did not get to a point where conflicts emerged between them and the adults who convened the group—that is, an attempt by those in the CC group to influence the policies and practices of the adult research team (Cell 2 in Table 1). However, the next article we review does hint at the challenges and contradictions we associate with a CC group convened by adults in an effort to gain youth input and perspective. In this case, adults are managing the sociopolitical development of young people whose distinctive interests and life experiences they hope will inform an adult-led project.

Case 2: Doing Participatory Qualitative Research: Development of a Shared Critical Consciousness with Racial Minority Research Advisory Group Members. Whereas Foster Fishman and her colleagues provided excellent examples of CSA training practices but only rudimentary aspects of sociopolitical action, Case 2 is an instance of CSA training practices that area situated firmly in Cell 2. One of the features we found especially compelling about this article by Maiter et al. (2013) was its transparency about the dilemmas they faced. Their refreshingly frank reflections on their effort to create a youth research advisory board for their study lay bare how structure and power make the sociopolitical action phase so challenging. They see community based participatory research as a partnership built on "… principles of self-determination, equity, and social justice…that aims to break down barriers between the researchers and researched" (p. 98). They wanted their community partners to function as equal contributors to the research project—in particular the young people in their research advisory group. The purpose of their study was to understand the growing problem of "youth violence in major Western cities like Toronto, Paris, and London." Eschewing a "polarized" view of marginalized youth of color as a population in need of increased regulation or as a structural problem, their study explored youth violence as "…a profoundly relational process of Self and Other, as a response to their experiences of violence, and as a strategy to heal from the significant wounds of injustice" (p. 200).

To include youth as community partners in addressing youth violence, the researchers faced the challenge of cultivating authentic youth voices. They decided to convene and train a youth Research Advisory Group (RAG) from scratch with help from their community partners. The aim was to create a group capable of informing decisions on research design and methodology along with other aspects of the study. Early on, however, complexities arose. In the authors' words, they saw "…initial resistance to critical consciousness…" (p. 198). They had hoped that the young people would provide them with an understanding of issues of racism and marginalization based on their life experiences in the community under study. Instead, they heard:

> 'I don't really see racial differences'.
> 'There are cultural differences among people in Canada but race does not have an impact on outcomes for people'.
> 'We don't need to consider race when we think about succeeding, we just need to work hard to succeed in life'.
> 'Just work hard and you will succeed'.
> 'Canada is a multicultural society with equality for everyone living here' [2].

Surprised and "perplexed," the researchers paused to consider what to do next. They decided to move forward by creating a supportive setting that allowed the young people to feel safe exploring a wide range of life experiences, not just those related to oppression. Over time, the young people began to problematize some of their everyday experiences and see them in structural terms. All indications were that the young people benefited from this dialog, yet there were contradictions in having researchers *promote* among the youth a particular critical view on their life experiences, one that would better meet the researcher's expectations. It is as though the researchers are ventriloquists shaping the collective voice of the RAG and then heeding the advice they hear from the mouths of its members. That is the cynical view. Another view is that in Case 1 and Case 2, the authors made an initial contribution to community development that needs to be nurtured over time. In Case 1, the researchers responded to a need adults in the community saw for a greater participation in local affairs. In Case 2, Maiter and her colleagues attempted to flatten the adult–youth, researcher-advisor hierarchy and promote more egalitarian dialogue among all participants. Clearly, engaging with young people in the RAG led the researchers to make changes in their research practices:

> …[a] process and transformation revealed our shared internalized ambiguity and uncertainty regarding issues of race and discrimination. The researchers and community collaborators discussed how these initial reactions reflected a sense of doubt that our research would capture the experiences of racism and discrimination at all. The transformative process required both patience and opportunities…. we developed an in-depth understanding of how experiences of racism and discrimination get minimized as not valuable or significant concerns in the dominant discourse (p. 208).

Maiter's team showed a willingness to shift from facilitator to participant roles. It was also a shift in the structure and power dynamics of adult–youth dialogue. Importantly, is a reminder to adults that their exercise of social power can manifest as adultism, and a willingness to cede power can open new avenues for advancing critical consciousness. This was the case for Maiter et al. who chose to join with their CC group rather than continuing to guide it from the outside.

Case 3: Promoting Critical Consciousness and Social Mobilization in HIV/AIDS Programmes: Lessons and Curricular Tools from a South African Intervention. Hatcher et al.'s article provides a glimpse of the potential of CC theory as basis of external as well as internal sociopolitical action. It began with an emphasis on sociopolitical action from the start. The researchers populated the CC group with

external action in mind; they chose major health and human rights issues as a target for sociopolitical action long before going into the field.

Hatcher and her colleagues were the program evaluators for this large-scale South African project that included a quantitative intervention research component (Kim et al. 2009). Their aim was to examine "… how a South African structural intervention used critical consciousness as a tool for prevention of intimate partner violence and HIV infection" (p. 542). They collected interview data on program managers, trainers, and intervention participants—women in rural villages. Called the Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity intervention (IMAGE) project, it was actually three interventions in one. The principal program, microfinance, was the economic development component. It was intended to help participants start their own businesses and become economically secure. The second component was heath-oriented (AIDS prevention). The third attended to the larger structural and cultural impediments to gender justice: "By training a group of natural leaders, IMAGE planned to instill a sense of empowerment so that participants could drive the process of mobilization themselves" (pp. 547–548). Many facilitators, benefactors, and allies were involved, including foundations, a poverty-focused microfinance agency, and a rural AIDS research center at a prominent South African university.

The rationale for this approach, according to the researchers and their benefactors, included a number of historical and structural factors. As it the case elsewhere, South Africa has a history of gender inequalities and an economic system that privileges men. The resulting poverty is associated with higher rates of HIV infection and exacerbated South Africa's history of migrant labor. All of these factors are associated with higher rates of casual sexual partners and the less bargaining power for young women in sexual situations and in controlling their sexual debut.

We consider the program evaluation research by Hatcher's team as an exemplar of sociopolitical action, one that blurs the boundaries separating CC groups from community organizing and mobilization. Their work illustrates the potential of CC when its principles are infused into social interventions. It makes a case for how and why CC that includes external sociopolitical action should to be the norm for social and health interventions in marginalized communities. Unlike the other two CC groups, participants in project IMAGE are young adults—not adolescents. We could find no comparable exemplar with a focus on youth that fit our criteria, but it still offers lessons for work with youth. Also, it is clear that project IMAGE had access to significantly more resources—including international, foundation, and governmental support—than did the other projects. Rather than compare IMAGE to those projects, we use it as an example of the potential of whole-community critical consciousness interventions with multiple components, an area largely unexplored in scholarly journals.

Unlike the two previous examples, research by program participants was not a salient activity, although IMAGE group members did map the relative wealth of households in the area as part of the SEF (Small Enterprise Foundation) project component. SEF then invited the poorest one-third of women to participate in its

loan program. Critical consciousness development was part of the project's second component:

> IMAGE's specialized facilitators deliver a curriculum of gender and HIV education known as 'Sisters for Life.' Staff recruited from the local area were trained by a gender activist to conduct 10 sessions on gender roles, sexual norms, partner communication, HIV prevention and gender-based violence, employing a mixture of information giving, whole-group discussions and role play. A key aim of the curriculum is to encourage dialogue that builds critical consciousness… women from each loan centre collectively choose who among them will attend a week-long 'natural leaders' training course aiming to engage them in additional reflection and leadership strategies (p. 543).

As noted previously, a distinctive aspect of project IMAGE was an intention from the start to have the participants involved in sociopolitical action. As individuals, the participants in this project shared insights from their CSA experience with people in their social network. They also worked with other CC group members to mobilize women for collective action to address local injustices and violence against women (Cells 3 and 4 of Table 1, respectively). The ultimate goals were improvements in the health of women, gender justice, and economic development.

Along with the other two projects reviewed, project IMAGE devoted a great deal of time to developing critical social analysis skills, but the IMAGE project took a different approach to doing so. They used a train-the-trainer model and mentors for the "natural leaders," mentioned in the quote above. Both these program components enhanced the women's capacity for sociopolitical action. Their CSA training was designed to go beyond personal competency to include the ability to promote CSA among women in the community. SEF women have played an important role in the community. As described by one participant:

> We have organised the all-women meeting, in which we told the chief, civic leader and the police about the crime in the area. It was the day in which the 'women against crime' initiative was formed (p. 549) [3].

Two IMAGE managers mentored the women for nearly 18 months through a process of observing their participation in Sisters for Life sessions, critiquing and discussing the stories that emerged from participants. Hatcher and her colleagues noted that the training was as much a relational process as it was an intellectual one, an observation that led us to include "personal development" in Cell 1 of Table 1. The project created a space where women felt they shared common problems and found useful solutions:

> Women have more responsibilities than before. We are living in an era where husbands are either dead or retrenched. We carry a lot of burdens on our shoulders. And along came SEF and says 'you are not alone, there are other women like you'. Women come together and share their problems and success stories (pp. 547).

For the women of one village, their participation in IMAGE project led to their first experience with organizing a protest march: "We organised a march against women

abuse in our area. Many women attended it. It was even published in our local newspaper and many people knew about us" (pp. 548) [4].

There are moving accounts of the insights and sociopolitical action of the women participating in IMAGE, but once again the authors shared some challenges associated with IMAGE's programmatic goals, challenges that sometimes clashed with the women's ability to pursue their human rights agenda. The program design required the participants to do collective action on their own time, in addition to the demands of their micro-financed businesses. Once again, the challenges faced by CC groups becomes relevant. The women selected for the program were among the poorest of their community, as one woman noted:

> Women do not have time to leave their businesses and concentrate on community activities because SEF does not want to know whether you have spent most of your time helping the community. It wants its money when the repayment time comes. So many women sacrifice such activities for their businesses (pp. 549).

This role conflict is another variation on the dilemmas CC groups can experience. Do the women feel sufficiently empowered to take issue with policies that relegate their social justice activities to a lower priority? To do so they would need to engage those who have guided them to this point and exposed them to new opportunities. The question is a hypothetical, however. No such conflicts were documented. We do know the women gained from the experience: a randomized control study on IMAGE by Kim et al. (2009) found increases in personal and collective sociopolitical action among the women. Their findings offer examples of how sociopolitical actions can be assessed:

> The qualitative data suggest that reductions in violence resulted from a range of responses to the intervention that enabled women to challenge the acceptability of violence, expect and receive better treatment from partners, leave violent relationships, give material and moral support to those experiencing abuse, mobilize new and existing community groups and raise public awareness about the need to address domestic violence (p. 829).

Discussion

From CSA to Sociopolitical Action

Early on, we described a specific interest in advancing youth CC development, but we were surprised to find so few examples of young people engaged in sociopolitical action as part of a larger critical conscious experience in the scholarly literature. A limitation of this review is that it did not include literature on CC outside of journal articles, or authors who use terminology other than critical consciousness to describe their work. Although we acknowledge this, our aims were specific to the status of CC theory and practice in the literature that is at the heart of peer-reviewed academic scholarship, which is the position refereed journals occupy.

Why should social justice *activism,* especially activism associated with structural targets, be shortchanged in this sector? Although Freire's ideas may be found in the journal literature, its presence is a hollow victory if the weakest point of its theory and practice is advancing struggle for social change. Our standards need to be higher.

The findings we emphasized in this article are that theorists expend most of their intellectual energy describing critical social analysis (CSA), its features, and its importance for liberation. Practitioners do the same by developing a wide range of techniques and exercises for advancing CSA, which is best illustrated in Case 1. Dialogue is essential CSA practice, and it can lead to interpersonal forms of sociopolitical action within the CC group. This occurs when group members act as agents by teaching others as they describe their personal sociopolitical insights. Foster-Fishman et al. acknowledged their project had no sociopolitical action phase, but we would argue that members in her CC group had two potential sociopolitical actions outcomes as represented in Cells 2 and 3 of Table 1. This is the first part of the spectrum. The term spectrum rather than category is appropriate here, because effects range from personal CSA gains not represented in Table 1 to an influence on others closely associated with the CC group (Cell 2 in Table 1) to a modest impact on people outside the confines of the CC group (Cell 3).

Both the theory and practice articles tended to speak in general terms about the potential for sociopolitical action that stems from fostering CSA and other CC elements, as if sociopolitical action arises without other preconditions such as leadership or mobilization skills. This critique applies to early writings on a developmental theory of critical consciousness by the first author (Watts et al. 1999). An exception to this shortcoming on this point was the IMAGE project, which explicitly addressed preparation for external action and its requisite skill sets. Unlike the others projects, however, IMAGE had a wealth of resources at its disposal.

Critical Consciousness and Sociopolitical Action Research Methodology

Our ongoing distinction between theory and practice was meaningful because traditionally, the academy has long distinguished formal theory and basic research from practice and practice-directed theory developed in situ. However, Eijnatten and Dijkstra (2005) describe how postmodern thinking and the rise of emancipatory and action research have complicated the boundary between the two without eliminating it. Our decision to define and dichotomize the articles as either theory or practice had some advantages. It allowed us to identify and construct sociopolitical action as outcome categories as well as categories descriptive of action (see Table 1). The notion of *measurable* outcomes, however, is a staple of post-positivist methodology that may clash with a postmodern, emancipatory view of critical consciousness. We see the tension between the two perspectives as a constructive one, much as Eijnatten and Dijkstra (2005) do:

> there are striking architectural similarities between theory-directed and practice-directed knowledge. Basic research is designed to test theories and

> to produce generalizations; action or applied research seeks to solve client problems and to produce workable solutions. However, both are mainly concerned with the validity and generalizability of propositions (pp. 141–142).

The last two sentences are very consistent with our findings: Yes, action to solve "client" (for CC it is "participant") problems are an aim of practice, but the primary concerns in both the theory and practice literature tend to be establishing the "validity" of an idea or intervention. Post-positivist thinking associated with validity, indicators, and objective measurement undermine emancipatory activities, however. For example, in traditional models of program design distinctions are typically made between activities, outputs and outcomes (Kettner et al. 2002). So is critical consciousness and its elements an activity or an outcome? As India's liberator, Mahatma Gandhi, said among many of his writings on process and outcome, "Means and ends are convertible terms in my philosophy of life" (Kripalani 1960, p. 95). Asking why these two concepts are separated in traditional program design may be a better question. A preoccupation with the conceptual and technical aspects of objectives and indicators of effectiveness can draw attention away from reflection on the sociopolitical *merit* of those objectives. "Liberation" being a daunting construct to operationalize can easily be trivialized by measures of self-efficacy or personal "resilience."

Nonetheless, the tension between postmodern and emancipatory perspectives can be a generative one. An emancipatory approach to CC offers a cyclical feedback model of assessing outcomes based on collective, critical reflection on past actions. As such, it is very consistent with the cyclical qualities of participatory action research (Stringer 2007). In the end, CC research benefits from both postmodern and post-positivist ideas. Both can be reconciled with research orientations such as Empowerment Evaluation (Fetterman and Wandersman 2005) and Responsive Evaluation (Stake 2004).

Conclusion and Recommendations

How can we bring more attention to sociopolitical action in scholarly literature on CC? Although all components of CC are important, sociopolitical action involves engaging others in a way that advances social justice. It is the only component of CC with the potential to change social and structural aspects of society. Personal development and CC group dialogue associated with developing CSA skills, though valuable, should at least contemplate making changes external to the group.

Although the four aspects of sociopolitical action are presented as a heuristic for structural sociopolitical action, social movements are a more difficult outcome to strive for than is CSA. Similarly, sociopolitical action limited to action internal to the CC group cannot be expected to have external effects. Thus, Cell 1 outcomes are easiest to attain and Cell 4 the most difficult; this explains the title of this article—we cannot think or talk our way to liberation. The challenges of sociopolitical action and movement building may also account for its limited

visibility in academic journals. It is our view that as researchers studying CC, we should strive to offer participants a pathway to external, or at least collective, sociopolitical action beyond Cell 1 in Table 1. Fishman et al. understood the importance of this, and they hoped their work would contribute to external or collective action by the participants in their CC group. Maiter et al. described how dialogue in the CC group led the changes in the behavior of the researchers and their original plans for guiding the young people within it. Hatcher et al.'s CC group made it to Cell 4 because they had planned to do so from the start. Along with the intention to do so, they had the needed resources. Although the structural features of the project often made it difficult for them to do so, the women in the group received the training needed to engage and mobilize village residents for actions such as protests. The participants also knew from the start their work would be more than personal learning, and they embraced the idea of activism (Hatcher 2015). The leadership training they received also contributed to their power as individuals, which we would argue increases their impact on their community even when they engage people as individuals (Cell 3). Although structural sociopolitical action is a challenge, building and sustaining a social movement that takes on major social issues, such as the school to prison pipeline, is even more daunting. Movement politics are mentioned for the sake of closure, as it entails a long-terms commitment to a series of actions aimed at liberation, for example, civil rights, women's, and gay rights movements. Unfortunately, we did not find any scholarly journal articles on CC (theory or practice based) explicitly aligned with a social movement; although some authors did say alliances should be the goal of critical consciousness groups. All this means, however, is that the use of CC theory and terminology *by name* is not a prominent feature of journal articles that cover mass movements.

We conclude with some ideas and recommendations for future CC research and action. First, because there is a consensus among theory and practice authors on the importance of sociopolitical action, but not on the details and mean to support it. We call for CC projects to put more emphasis on sociopolitical action from the start. That means CSA-building activities should focus on problematizing and targeting of action, not just the learning of general CSA principles. Targets and actions must be a feasible, relevant to the participants, and sensitive to their current state of development.

Second, in many cases practitioners engaged in research, perhaps due to skepticism about post-positivist methods, do not formally assess sociopolitical action outcomes. Our discussion of Table 1 is an effort to advocate for mixed method, participatory research strategies that embrace pragmatic and diverse methods of outcome assessment. Third, those of us who do research as an occupation need a re-commitment to ongoing partnerships with community-based, veteran practitioners. For many, this requires a struggle against institutional norms and structures that do not support such work. The combined expertise of community residents, educators, health professionals, community activists, and professional researchers can unite sociopolitical action and the other elements of critical consciousness.

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