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Critical Consciousness: Current Status and Future Directions

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Abstract

In this chapter, the authors consider Paulo Freire's construct of critical consciousness (CC) and why it deserves more attention in research and discourse on youth political and civic development. His approach to education and similar ideas by other scholars of liberation aims to foster a critical analysis of society—and one's status within it—using egalitarian, empowering, and interactive methods. The aim is social change as well as learning, which makes these ideas especially relevant to the structural injustice faced by marginalized youth. From their review of these ideas, the authors derive three core CC components: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. They highlight promising research related to these constructs and innovative applied work including youth action-research methodology. Their conclusion offers ideas for closing some of the critical gaps in CC theory and research. © 2011 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

For most scholars in the United States, youth social action aimed at the roots of social injustice is near the periphery of theory and research on civic engagement. In this chapter, we consider reasons why political development ought to be more central to the discourse. We make a case for this shift by describing the potential Freire's notion of "critical consciousness" has for informing youth development and activism. Critical consciousness (CC) describes how oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them. Freire used it to increase literacy among Brazilian peasants, but he also used CC as a tool for liberation—helping those he worked with to "read the world" as they learned to "read the word" and then act on their world in the interest of justice. Our view is that youth civic education and engagement in the United States, especially for marginalized youth, can help them to understand themselves in a sociopolitical context as it did for the disenfranchised of Brazil. In addition to humanitarian activities and greater participation in electoral activities, marginalized youth would benefit from a social analysis that helps them understand and then resist unjust conditions through constructive social action. Although privileged youth have many more opportunities than those who are marginalized, they too can benefit from learning how social injustice operates and ways they can promote a more just society.

Although they are in the minority, there are scholars who recognize political activism as part of youth civic engagement. Westheimer and Kahne (2003) include it as one of their three forms of citizenship: (1) the personally responsible citizen who demonstrates citizenship through individual acts such as volunteering; (2) the participatory citizen who engages in local community affairs and stays current on local and national issues; and (3) the justice-oriented citizen who, like the participatory citizen, emphasizes collective work toward community betterment while maintaining a more "critical stance" on social, political, and economic issues. Like Freire, Westheimer and Kahne use the term "critical" to distinguish this justice-oriented perspective, but it is not a feature of the first two forms of citizenship. The participatory citizen stays "current" on social issues, but a critical reflection on the root causes of social conditions is not a priority. In contrast, the justice-oriented citizen is oriented toward collective action and structural perspectives on community betterment. In this chapter, we call it a "critical stance"—critical reflection regarding society's culture, policy, and practices or critical social analysis; we use the terms critical reflection and critical social analysis interchangeably.

These ideas beg the question of how reflection and action are related. Does critical reflection necessarily lead to action, or are there other ingredients needed to move beyond "armchair activism"? Most scholars and activists would see critical social analysis as necessary for effective political action—people do not participate blindly without some understanding of why they are engaging in political action. What is less clear is whether

critical reflection is *sufficient*. Consider this example from Freire's (1973) book, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, ". . . to every understanding, sooner or later an action corresponds. Once man perceives a challenge, understands it, and *recognizes the possibilities of response* he acts. The nature of that action corresponds to the nature of his understanding" (p. 44, emphasis added).

The phrase "recognizes the possibility of response" suggests that psychological factors influence civic and political behavior. Most scholars and activists would agree that a sense of agency is also necessary for effective political action. That is, people may understand structural inequalities, but not feel compelled to act on their insights unless they believe their efforts will yield a desired outcome. Together, the ideas above suggest a theoretical formulation of critical consciousness that has distinct components—critical social analysis, political efficacy (the perceived ability to effect sociopolitical change), and participation in civic or political action. Because social or political action may influence critical reflection as well as vice versa, there is likely to be a complex relationship between these components.

Freire is revered by progressive scholars, educators, and activists alike because he weaves together critical theory, a philosophy of education, pedagogy, and social change. He is also distinguished by his passion for practice: he was as much a practicing teacher as a theorist. His egalitarian pedagogy values collaboration and rejects sharp hierarchies between teacher and student. He was also critical of "banking" education where the teacher "deposited" knowledge in students, rather than promoting agency and learning through engagement with the world. For him reading, dialogue, reflection, and action were all part of what he called critical consciousness and were key to a new self-understanding in historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Freire's emphasis on consciousness and social justice has roots in ancient wisdom systems such as religion and philosophy. However, European intellectuals such as Marx moved away from notions of karma and the divine and relied instead on emerging social science theory. Marx's theory of dialectic materialism in the late 1800s argued that the consciousness associated with class oppression helps sustain inequality and explains why people engage in actions contrary to their personal and class interests.

Later, the postcolonial era in Africa and the Pacific Islands gave rise to an analysis of colonization—particularly its psychological impact. Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon were among the leading social theorists of this era of the mid-twentieth century. In the United States, Carter Woodson's writings on Black education in the 1930s made a case for how segregation-era schooling served to socialize children into subservient social roles and a sense of inferiority. The major contribution Memmi, Fanon, Woodson, and other early writers made to the CC idea was a cultural and

psychological perspective on liberation. In particular, they elaborated how institutional policies and practices contribute to the internalization of oppression. Since the mid-twentieth century, when Freire was developing his ideas, critical social analysis has increasingly relied on a *rights* perspective (human or constitutional). In this view, social injustice is rooted in a deprivation of human or constitutional rights. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the Civil Rights Movement, the Equal Rights Amendment for Women, and the gay rights movement are all examples of the growing rights perspective. As for youth rights, in countries such as South Africa and Northern Ireland, young people have rights to participate in civic and governmental affairs that are protected by national law. This is not the case in the United States, which has not been a world leader in establishing young people's rights. To date, the United States and Somalia remain the only two nations that are not signatories to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child.

The Research Literature on Critical Consciousness

Much of this section will focus on “sociopolitical” theory, constructs, and research that is consistent with critical consciousness writings (e.g., Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hsieh, 2006; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). It provides detail on the three CC components we described early on. Proponents of a sociopolitical perspective on youth civic development, which includes the authors of this chapter, do not always describe their work as critical consciousness theory; nor do proponents of “empowerment” theory, whose ideas we will also describe in this section. According to leading empowerment theorists, empowerment includes “. . . a combination of self-acceptance and self-confidence, social and political understanding, and the ability to play an assertive role in controlling resources and decisions in one's community” (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988, p. 726). This is obviously similar to critical social analysis, yet leading authors who write about empowerment do not necessarily mention CC or Freire.

Components of Critical Consciousness. In our view, CC is composed of three components—critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Knowledge of CC and its component parts helps youth practitioners and scholars facilitate the process and expand understanding of the concept. *Critical reflection* refers to a social analysis and moral rejection of societal inequities, such as social, economic, racial/ethnic, and gender inequities that constrain well-being and human agency. Those who are critically reflective view social problems and inequalities in systemic terms. *Political efficacy* is the perceived capacity to effect social and political change by individual and/or collective activism. It follows that people will be much more likely to engage in critical action if they feel that they can create change. *Critical action* refers to individual or collective action

taken to change aspects of society, such as institutional policies and practices, which are perceived to be unjust. This is a broad view of activism that includes participation in activities such as voting, community organizing, and peaceful protests.

Freire viewed the relation between reflection and action as reciprocal. Critical reflection is generally considered a precursor to critical action—people do not act to change their social conditions without some consciousness or awareness that their social conditions are unjust. He theorized that as oppressed people begin to analyze their social conditions, they would feel able and compelled to act to change them. Reciprocally, as people act on their social conditions they would gain a more sophisticated understanding of structural oppression. Thus, as critical reflection grows, critical action follows and vice versa in the cyclical process of CC development. However, there will also be times when critical action fails to yield the desired result, which can lead to frustration and cynicism, rather than a greater awareness of societal inequities.

Increasingly, research supports the idea that CC includes critical reflection, critical action, and political efficacy components, and that these components can be measured with marginalized youth of color (e.g., Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer & Li, in press). But what leads critically reflective young people to *act* on their critical reflection sooner rather than later? Research to date does not provide an answer; in our writings we have proposed a sociopolitical theory that lends itself to quantitative approaches. However, instrumentation is in an early phase. Below, we review the conceptualization and measurement of critical reflection, critical action, and political efficacy. We note how these constructs have been measured to help explain them and to guide researchers interested in studying CC with young people and how youth practitioners can think about targeting different components of CC in advocacy training, interventions, and other settings.

Critical Reflection. Of the three components, critical reflection is the most neglected in youth civic engagement research, while being a central component of CC. Therefore, it will receive the most attention here. Rather than limiting analysis to “blaming the victim” and other individualistic explanations for societal inequities, critical reflection results from an analysis of the structural causes of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and gendered disparities in health, well-being, educational attainment, wealth, and other domains. It also frames social inequalities in a historical context, with an emphasis on its root *causes*—social structures’ policies and practices. Returning to Freire’s perspective, “The more accurately men grasp true causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be” (1973, p. 44).

We found no scales designed especially to measure critical reflection. However, social psychological theories of attribution are particularly relevant to critical reflection research. People make causal attributions to

make sense of social problems and inequalities, such as disparities between poor people and rich people. These attributions may be more individual (e.g., we have an equal social system and opportunities, therefore the limited effort and/or ability of groups on the lower rungs of society cause social problems and inequalities) or may be more structural (e.g., we have an unequal social system and opportunities, therefore social systems, policies, and historical conditions cause social problems and inequalities). People with greater levels of critical reflection make more structural attributions for social problems and group disparities.

Neville, Coleman, Falconer, and Holmes (2005) repurposed an existing measure to assess individual and structural attributions for the collective economic and social position of African Americans. Individual attributions were represented by items such as “lack of motivation and unwillingness to work hard” and structural attributions by endorsement of “lack of educational opportunities” and similar items. Neville et al. (2005) observed that individualistic attributions were associated with a “color blind” racial ideology, where the existence of racism is denied or minimized among African American adults. Although these authors did not explicitly align their “attribution of blame” scale with CC theory, or sample young people, we see it a promising approach to assess critical reflection.

Another construct associated with critical social analysis is social dominance orientation (SDO), which refers to the attributions people make for groups’ collective social position (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). The SDO scale measures support for group-based inequalities and dominance and has been associated with ideologies such as the “meritocracy myth,” racist attitudes, and social Darwinism. If scored in reverse, SDO becomes a measure for the rejection of such views. Sample items include “It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.” Rejection of ideologies that favor social inequality has been associated with greater levels of critical reflection among urban adolescents (Diemer et al., 2006). Similarly, critical reflection (also measured by lower SDO scores) was associated with greater progress in career development among urban adolescents, suggesting that critical reflection may help marginalized youth overcome external barriers to success in school and work (Diemer & Blustein, 2006).

Qualitative and participatory action research has approached the assessment of critical reflection through the identification of themes. Interventions are often part of the endeavor and researchers are more likely to be explicit in their use of CC concepts and terms. As their participants reflect on their lives in their own words, they do not necessarily distinguish these three CC components. Carlson, Engbretson, and Chamberlain (2006) employed a photovoice methodology with both youth and adults of a low-income urban area in the United States, using the participants’ explanations of their community photographs as data to

explore critical reflection. Their analysis led to a four-stage understanding of critical reflection: (1) passive adaptation, (2) emotional engagement, (3) cognitive awakening, and (4) intention to act. An example of “cognitive awakening” is the increased awareness of connections between local economic activity and community conditions. One participant demonstrated cognitive awakening in her understanding of how poor community conditions are perpetuated by local businesses: “The owners won’t participate in, or contribute to, anything we do in the neighborhood. Why do we support them when they grab their children, their fine expensive cars, and our money and dash out of the community before dark every day?” (p. 845). Making this type of attribution for social problems is indicative of more advanced critical reflection.

Action researchers have sought to enhance CC as they learn about it, fostering sociopolitical development among youth in an effort to lessen the risk of negative health or psychosocial outcomes. In a participatory action research project, Stewart, Riecken, Scott, Tanaka, and Riecken (2008)—engaged indigenous Canadian youth in the creation of health information videos. According to the authors, the young people expanded their notions of health literacy to their own cultural traditions, developed a more critical perspective on issues in their community, and some reported changes in their personal health behavior. Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999) coached high school students to decode social messages in “gangsta” rap music videos. All too often, these representations of youth emphasize shortcomings in the character of individuals rather than social systems. Similarly, Campbell and MacPhail’s (2002) CC intervention engaged South African youth in discussions of gender roles to help them move the “causal” explanation for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection from a more personal decision-making problem to one that took into consideration cultural norms that pressured young women into unsafe sex. Their work also shows the power of a Freirean approach in helping young people examine their social privilege (e.g., as males, heterosexuals, affluent, etc.) as well as their marginalization. Campbell and MacPhail (2002) recommend that peer HIV education include CC education and reflection, particularly on notions of masculinity and femininity.

The connection between critical reflection on social identity and internalized oppression or privilege is also important. Guessous (2004) and Watts (2010) analyzed young people’s applications to a selective, nationally recognized training program for community organizers of color. They found that participants’ interest in social justice organizing stemmed from critical values instilled through family in childhood and adolescence, a salient and positive social identity, personal experience with injustice, and critical reflection. Watts’ analysis of this dataset suggested a synergy between critical reflection and the rich and varied experiences with social identity and activism in these settings; his findings suggest that researchers need to assess opportunities for civic and political engagement in the

social and institutional environment as well as psychological factors in political development.

Political Efficacy. Political efficacy has been studied in political science since the 1950s, generally referring to people's beliefs about their capacity to be effective political actors ("internal political efficacy") and beliefs that government structures and officials are responsive to one's political interests ("external political efficacy") (Morrell, 2003). In this chapter, we use the term political efficacy to connote the perceived capacity to effect social and political change via individual and/or collective activism. Kieffer (1984) similarly argued that "participatory competence," the perceived capacity to effect change, was an important precursor to activism behavior. It follows that people will be much more likely to engage in critical action if they perceive the ability to create change via their actions.

The Sociopolitical Control Scale (SPCS) measures youths' perceived ability to effect social change via political participation and social action (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). A sample (reverse-coded) SPCS item reads, "So many other people are active in local issues and organizations that it doesn't matter much to me whether I participate or not." Generally, the SPCS has demonstrated satisfactory reliability but not always with urban adolescent samples. Nonetheless, it holds promise as a measure of political efficacy. The SPCS is rooted in Kieffer's notion of participatory competence and has been used with youth populations.

Critical Action. Critical action, the third component of critical consciousness, refers to individual or collective action taken to change aspects of society, such as institutional policies and practices, which are perceived to be unjust. We take a broad view of critical action here, encompassing social justice activism (which usually occurs outside of traditional political processes) as well as action taken within the political system to change unjust social conditions and policies. Both forms of action presuppose some degree of critical reflection—that participants view social problems in systemic terms. Critical action is generally measured in quantitative research by the frequency of participation or intentions to participate in social action. Research has devoted less attention to the subjective meaning people attribute to their social and political action, perhaps an avenue for future research.

The Youth Inventory of Involvement (YII) broadly measures youths' participation in political activities and also sports, the arts, and school events (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). The Political Activities subscale of the YII consists of seven items that measure the frequency of participation in "a protest march, meeting or demonstration" and "preparing and making verbal and written presentations to organizations, agencies, conferences, or politicians." These items measure critical action via participation in more traditional forms of political behavior as well as collective social action. The Political Activities subscale has shown good reliability with a diverse sample of Canadian youth.

The Activism Orientation Scale (AOS) measures how likely people will engage in political action taken to reduce perceived inequities (Corn-ing & Myers, 2002). The conceptual framework of the AOS also takes a broad definition of activist behavior, measuring participation with Con-ventional Activism and High-Risk Activism subscales. A sample Con-ventional Activism item asks, “How likely is it that you will attend a political group’s organizational meeting?” and a sample High-Risk Activism item asks “How likely is it that you will engage in a political activity in which you suspect there would be a confrontation with the police or possible arrest?” This scale has been shown to be reliable with predominantly White samples of college students, but its usefulness with younger or mar-ginalized populations is unknown.

Comparing Critical Consciousness and Empowerment Theory. As noted earlier, empowerment theory is related to critical consciousness and also overlaps with sociopolitical theory. Typically, empowerment theory examines the experience of collective or personal power that is associated with social change activity. It is also concerned with how community resources such as organizations can foster social power. Psychological empowerment is seen as having cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, which researchers use to assess an individual’s capacity to engage in change activities and the extent to which they actually do so. The Cognitive Empowerment Scale (Peterson, Hamme, & Speer, 2002) assesses the intellectual dimension of psychological empowerment, and it resembles critical reflection but with a greater emphasis on social power. Their “behavioral empowerment” scale parallels the cognitive version by measuring action intended to change community conditions. It is a mea-sure of critical action that asks about behavior such as signing petitions, attending a public meeting to press for policy change, and so on. Research on cognitive and behavioral empowerment indicates that a more sophisti-cated understanding of community and political power does not predict activism behavior among adults—more evidence that social analysis does not necessarily lead to action, and more findings suggesting that political efficacy may mediate or moderate the relationship between the two.

Differences between the theories are mostly matters of emphasis—both theories include critical reflection, agency, and critical action. Empowerment theory puts less emphasis on an awareness of the structural causes of social problems and social inequality (critical reflection) than does sociopolitical theory. However, the reverse is true with respect to notions of power and agency, which is where empowerment puts its emphasis.

Conclusion

This chapter began by placing critical consciousness in a historical con-text, to reveal points of departure for contemporary research and practice.

In the second section on research, we noted that many investigators did not view their work as direct extensions of CC theory. Instead, their focus was often describing and understanding psychological concepts associated with the recognition of social injustice and the precursors of action to address it. Yet, researchers have made a number of important contributions to the advancement of CC that we will highlight in this conclusion. The first section looks at the future directions for CC research and theory. The second explores examples and implications for CC practice and action. In both cases, we offer an assessment of progress made to date and our own perspectives on sociopolitical theory.

Future Directions for Critical Consciousness Research and Theory. As Freire's words show, the vocabulary of CC includes history; culture; liberation; oppression (external and internal); social identity; and an integrated perspective on reflection, agency, and political action. As a new area for U.S. social science, CC has not yet matured into well-articulated theory or a coherent body of empirical research. Nonetheless, it has moved in some promising directions. Our review emphasized three core constructs: critical reflection (or critical social analysis), political efficacy (or sense of agency), and critical action. Other ideas in the CC "vocabulary" such as internalized oppression and social identity find expression in the qualitative studies where the voices of young people can be heard and interrelated themes are the units of analysis.

Critical Reflection. In the preceding section, we reviewed promising theoretical and empirical developments in conceptualizing and measuring reflection. What has been given less emphasis, when compared to writings on CC by activist intellectuals, is the role of history. Virtually all organizations engaged in youth organizing see knowledge of history as an essential part of CC.¹ Its temporal dimension helps reveal cause-and-effect relationships between ongoing social forces and current social circumstances. At the moment, we are without a method to assess historical understanding as part of critical social analysis, but qualitative content analysis of interview data offers one way to assess this. Another would be a "quiz" that measures knowledge of significant events (the Stonewall rebellion), movements (women's suffrage), and leaders (Mahatma Gandhi) in social action movements. Recognizing the difficulty in measuring a broad, nuanced historical perspective, quiz scores could serve as a proxy measure of historical perspective.

A different approach to assessing causal reasoning in critical analysis is found in attribution theory and the measurement of attitudes toward social dominance ideology. Attribution theory looks at how what we see as the causes of social problems influences political thinking. Social dominance theory looks at attitudes toward oppressive ideologies. Measures exist for both, and both can be useful in supporting the proposition that young people who attribute social problems to structural injustice and oppressive ideologies (as distinct from endorsing individualistic

attributions and a tolerance of social domination) are more likely to engage in social-change activity.

Social Identity. Both sociopolitical and empowerment theory lack a systematic incorporation of social identity. However, there are theories and measures of ethnic; racial; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT); and other forms of social identity that could make contributions to CC theory and research. Even a cursory look at social movements and political action shows how social group membership and identity can be a basis for solidarity and collective action. Early research described links between group consciousness and political participation for Blacks, women, and the poor and in later studies between ethnic identity and civic engagement for U.S. immigrant adults (Stepick & Stepick, 2002). Recent research has found that racial group identity and experiences of racial discrimination shape civic behavior (Flanagan, Syvertsen, Gill, Gallay, & Cumsille, 2009). Theory already exists to make the link between social identity and political development. Black racial identity theory includes measures of how members of oppressed social groups (Black people in this case) liberate themselves from oppressive social identities and form new, positive ones. One item on the Nationalist subscale of the Black Racial Identity Scale suggests a direct connection between social identity and critical social analysis: “I believe that the world should be interpreted from a Black perspective” (Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998). Others (Ginwright & James, 2002) argue that a critical social analysis of internalized and external oppression heals the wounds of social oppression and marginalization.

Empowerment Theory. Although our focus was primarily on sociopolitical theory (i.e., critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action) as a basis for empirical CC research, we also noted the importance of empowerment theory. Sociopolitical theory is strong on understanding CC’s interplay of psychological and behavioral dynamics, while empowerment theory emphasizes an understanding of social power, sense of control, and the settings that foster these factors. Leading empowerment theorists and researchers such as Zimmerman (2000) consider three levels of analysis: individual, organizational, and community. Some versions of sociopolitical theory include the “opportunity structures” young people have for engaging in civic activity, but overall there is less emphasis on settings. In any case, the two theories are not incompatible. For example, the sociopolitical control measure discussed above originated in the empowerment literature. The two theories are complementary in that theorizing about persons and environments is essential to understanding youth engagement.

Implications for Practice and Action. This chapter focused mostly on translating CC ideas to social science theory and empirical study. However, Freire’s ideas integrated theory and practice, because he was committed to education for *liberation*. Similarly, Martín-Baró (1994) saw reflection, theory, and action as reciprocal processes rather than

categories. It is not coincidental that Freire and Martín-Baró worked in South and Central America rather than the United States. The history of deadly state and paramilitary terror led many to reject experimental social psychology in favor of liberation social psychology and to embrace participatory action research (PAR). We highlighted a few U.S. PAR studies because more is available on work with youth populations, but the bulk of work directly relevant to the practice of CC originates outside of North America. *Psychology of Liberation: Theory and Applications* edited by Montero and Sonn (2009) serves as the single best example. These opening comments on practice are important because the cultural and historical forces influencing the U.S. social sciences are a challenge to an integration of research and practice consistent with CC's social justice origins. Traditionally, the physical sciences (which until recently, the social sciences have emulated) place a premium on objectivity, see researcher effects as a source of error, and privilege the production of new knowledge over the application of existing knowledge. Participatory action researchers have a stance that is contrary to many of these principles, so its proponents in the United States can find themselves on the academic margins. In PAR, knowledge production shares the spotlight with relationships and intervention and the researcher is an active player rather than a source of error variance. Yes, postpositivist traditions have been challenged by critical theory, deconstructionist and postmodern ideas, but activism in the academy is not yet in the mainstream. With these considerations in mind, we look to our colleagues to the south such as Montero, who has extensive experience as professor, activist, and CC practitioner.

It is generally agreed that, in practice, developing critical reflection is a social and process-intensive activity. As Montero (2009) notes, "The conscientization process begins with the people's participation and the discussion-reflection which is part of the sequence action-reflection-action (in organized community groups or in other forms of gathering). This supposes a variety of ways to problematize naturalized modes of understanding and interpreting daily life and events happening within it. Problematization is a way to challenge accepted explanations for those phenomena that have been assumed as normal and logical in daily life, but which make people's lives difficult; even painful, unfair, and hard" (p. 78).

If there is a single term that captures CC practice, it is *group discussion*. To be successful according to Montero, there must be listening, dialog, humility, respect, and critique. The aim is to come close to consensus on the problematization of recurring aspects of everyday experience. From there, young people begin to consider solutions aimed at the sociopolitical roots of the problem. It should be evident how this activity brings together attribution theory, a historical-cultural perspective, and the affairs of everyday life shared by the group participants. Sociopolitical and empowerment

theory would contend that political efficacy or a psychological sense of power must be cultivated along with this process to move young people toward critical action on the problem.

In the spirit of Freire's work, U.S. researchers should consider collaborative methods and a social justice stance in their study of youth civic and political engagement. Tracing the development of CC and related topics over time (e.g., internalized oppression, historical analysis, and social identity) benefits from authentic, egalitarian, and mutually beneficial relationships. Case study and mixed-method longitudinal research can identify and help cross-validate core CC constructs, while narrative and participant observation methods complement knowledge gained from quantitative studies. All of this requires time and commitment by the host organization. Because social justice is a core value in youth organizations engaged in social-change work, they tend to be especially responsive to the collaborative features of participatory research methods. Watts offers one concrete example of this from his experience with PAR. In a PAR project he supervised, young people were upset about the taste and nutrition of cafeteria food in their schools. As the group discussion progressed, it became evident that students attending schools in higher-income areas had well-stocked salad bars, while those in marginalized areas had none. Two things happened as time went on: young people came to see their everyday experience of low-quality food as problematic rather than "just the way it is," but as a group they also came to see between-school inequalities in food quality as problematic. Critical social analysis of this inequality included their racial and social class identities. Graduate students worked with these high school students to conduct a study of the problem among peers and stakeholders and helped them create a presentation for school administrators aimed at change in food-service policies.

Youth sociopolitical interventions and the facilitation of critical reflection groups are within the scope of many human service and university-based personnel, but community organizers are the specialists in critical action (see endnote for leading examples). However, only recently have organizers made a systematic effort to include youth development outcomes as well as political outcomes to their mission. Political work can be stressful, and there is a hazard in boosting critical social analysis in young people without raising political efficacy at the same time. An expanded awareness of entrenched social problems without a sense of agency or the organizing skills to set and achieve attainable objectives can lead young people to feel overwhelmed and demoralized. Thus, a holistic approach to working with young people and teamwork across areas of specialty is essential. Young people are a precious social resource in a stage of rapid development. Researchers and practitioners in the social sciences can contribute to youth civic development by filling the gap between youth socio-emotional development and political competence.

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Note

1. Stand-out examples include the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL), Education for Liberation, PICO National Network, the Movement Strategy Center, the Brotherhood/Sister Sol, and Project South.

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