

## Introduction

### Introducing the Contexts and Settings of Youth's Critical Consciousness Development

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Structural oppression and systemic inequity are interwoven into the fabric of American society. One need only reflect on the past decade to see the continued pernicious influence of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, nativism, heterosexism, transphobia, and multiple other forms of marginalization on the rights, freedoms, and humanity of large segments of our society. We live in a system of white supremacy and patriarchy that patterns not only our history but our current society, institutions, interactions, and beliefs about each other and ourselves (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). To be Black, Brown, Indigenous, immigrant, differently-abled, gay, gender-expansive, female-identified – among many other identities – means being subjected to systems and structures that, at best, limit access to the resources and privileges others take for granted and, at worst, take away fundamental rights to life, liberty, and choice. To be white, straight, able-bodied, male-identified, and more (e.g., Christian Protestant) means wielding privilege one may or may not know one has, but that contributes to the maintenance of these inequities. These unfair, unjust, and inequitable social conditions shape all our lives in multiple seen and unseen ways and have effects across all developmental domains (Brown et al., 2019; Ruck et al., 2019).

Social scientists have amassed considerable evidence on how oppressive systems shape people's development, adaptive functioning, and general well-being (Heberle et al., 2020), showing deleterious effects on multiple life outcomes across multiple populations. It is only relatively recently, however, that scholars have begun to consider people's own beliefs and actions regarding the fairness and legitimacy of the systems in which they live. This shift in perspective recognizes that individuals can be formidable assets in the fight against injustice, and treats them as active agents in the construal and transformation of systems of oppression. Central to this area of inquiry is critical consciousness (Freire, 1968/2000; Watts et al., 2011), which relates to how individuals critically "read" social conditions, feel empowered to change those conditions, and engage in action toward that goal. Alongside allied perspectives such as sociopolitical development, culturally relevant pedagogy,

critical theory, and antiracist perspectives, critical consciousness theory has emerged as a particularly useful framework for interrogating how people understand, navigate, and resist social injustice and inequity.

#### WHAT IS CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Critical consciousness was originally conceptualized by Paulo Freire (1921–1997) as a pedagogical method to foster the ability of marginalized people to analyze the economic, political, historical, and social forces that contribute to inequitable social conditions and become empowered to change these conditions (Freire, 1973, 1968/2000). Freire termed this process “*conscientização*” – translated into English as “conscientization” – and described it as a dialectical process of reflection and action in which people engage with others about their experiences of oppression and marginalization and attend to their historical, social, and economic sources. Through discussion and dialogue – core elements of Freirean pedagogy – people become critically aware of the causes of their marginalization at the hands of historical and societal forces, take action to address this marginalization, and further deepen their understanding of the causes of oppression based on this experience.

Critical consciousness is considered to be especially potent for those who experience marginalization and structural oppression firsthand, in their daily lives and across their lived environments. It has even been called the “antidote to oppression” (Watts et al., 1999) because of its ability to arm marginalized youth with the insight, agency, and engagement needed to navigate and change oppressive systems (Watts et al., 2011). Yet, critical consciousness is also important for those experiencing relative privilege, as they work to understand systems of power, and their own power and privilege within those systems, and ally with others to bring about social change.

Building on Freire’s theory of conscientization, and his pedagogical approach, developmental scientists typically conceptualize critical consciousness as three distinct, but overlapping components (e.g., Diemer et al., 2015; Watts et al., 2011). The first component, critical reflection, refers to an individual’s ability to analyze current social realities critically, and recognize how historical, social, economic, and political conditions limit access to opportunity and perpetuate injustice. The second component, critical motivation (also referred to as sociopolitical or political efficacy), encompasses an individual’s motivation and perceived ability to act to change these social, economic, and political conditions. The third component, critical action, is the extent to which individuals participate in action, individually or collectively, to resist, challenge, or disrupt social inequity. While the first component concerns increased awareness of and deepening reflection on unjust circumstances and their causes, the latter two involve the translation of this critical

reflection into behaviors and action. The process of gaining critical awareness and acting to change conditions is self-perpetuating and reciprocal. That is, scholars conceptualize critical reflection as leading directly to action, but they also see critical action as reinforcing and deepening critical reflection and analysis, creating a virtuous cycle starting from either reflection or action. The role of critical motivation in this cycle is the subject of continued conceptual (i.e., theoretical) and empirical debate, but it is often thought of as a mediator through which reflection is linked to action or as a moderator that changes the way reflection and action influence each other or interrelate (e.g., Diemer & Rapa, 2016). Scholars are just beginning to delve more deeply into how these components interact and/or pattern together to characterize different types, levels, and/or processes of critical consciousness development (Christens, et al., 2013; Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Godfrey et al., 2019). This is the case, at least in part, because measures incorporating all three dimensions of critical consciousness are just emerging (e.g., Diemer et al., 2022; Rapa et al., 2020a; see also Rapa & Godfrey, in press[a]).

Critical consciousness is important from a societal perspective as it can play a central role in addressing unjust systems, challenging marginalization in society, and promoting positive community development. It is also an extremely important developmental competency for individuals, as it promotes positive growth and development. As mentioned earlier, it can function as an “antidote to oppression” or a form of “psychological armor” (Watts et al., 1999) for individuals experiencing and navigating oppressive systems. Indeed, we now have considerable evidence, primarily for Black, Brown, and low-socioeconomic status (SES) youth, that higher critical consciousness is connected to better educational outcomes (e.g., Seider et al., 2020), higher occupational aspirations and attainment (e.g., Rapa et al., 2018), greater political, civic and community participation (e.g., Bañales et al., 2020; Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Tyler et al., 2020), and enhanced well-being across a range of dimensions (e.g., Godfrey et al., 2019; Zimmerman et al., 1999) (for excellent reviews, see Diemer et al., 2016; Heberle et al., 2020; Maker Castro et al., 2022). Although less scholarship to date has examined critical consciousness among individuals holding ethnic/racial, class, and/or other forms of privilege, developing a critical stance toward the status quo is also important – and doing so should not be the sole responsibility of those who are marginalized or oppressed. As many authors in this volume argue, it is also important for those who hold power and privilege to recognize it, and then to use that power and privilege to engage in efforts to dismantle systems that reify, uphold, or perpetuate injustice and inequity. Indeed, recognizing privilege and its sources, and learning how to work in allyship and solidarity with those individuals and groups experiencing oppression, is a critical developmental competency for those who hold more privilege as well (Spanierman & Smith, 2017).

THE ROLE OF CONTEXTS AND SETTINGS AND THE  
ORGANIZATION OF THIS VOLUME

It is clear that fostering critical consciousness has considerable value – both for society as a whole and for individuals themselves. Yet, important questions remain about how to foster this fundamental competency, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood, which are especially sensitive developmental periods during which youth are uniquely enabled and motivated to think and act critically about societal fairness and social injustice (Brown & Larson, 2009; Erikson, 1968; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009; Quintana, 1999). While the field has matured in recent years (Heberle et al., 2020), until now no authoritative, contemporary volume has existed that brings together leading scholars to address some of the field’s most urgent questions: How does critical consciousness develop? What are the key settings (e.g., homes, schools, community programs) and societal contexts (e.g., racism, immigration) that inform critical consciousness development among youth? These questions are of utmost importance to deepen our understanding of youth development and societal change. Answering them is more urgent than ever given the current sociopolitical moment – a moment in which longstanding racial inequity, bias, discrimination, and competing ideologies are not only evident, but amplified.

*Developing Critical Consciousness in Youth: Contexts and Settings* addresses these questions and more. This edited volume – along with the complementary volume *Critical Consciousness: Expanding Theory and Measurement* (Rapa & Godfrey, in press[b]) – stems from our engagement with leading scholars in the field to identify topics and content considered most necessary to meaningfully advance critical consciousness scholarship. The chapters in this volume represent the most cutting-edge work by scholars to understand the key contexts and settings that contribute to critical consciousness development in youth. Following Heberle et al. (2020) and Watts et al. (1999), we explore key contexts and settings of youth’s lives relevant for critical consciousness development, introducing new perspectives and empirical data regarding the features of these contexts and settings that play a consciousness-raising role. In the remainder of this introduction, we review what answers the literature has provided so far regarding the contexts and settings of youth development and then describe how the chapters in this volume seek to add to this growing understanding. We focus on three areas that are predominant in shaping youth’s lives and lived experiences: (1) pedagogical, curricular, and school-based contexts; (2) extracurricular contexts; and (3) societal contexts.

### Part I: Pedagogical, Curricular, and School-Based Contexts

**Summary of Current Knowledge** Parental and peer socialization and the contexts of classrooms and schools have arguably received the most attention from scholars to date as primary settings of critical consciousness development, and for good reason (e.g., Heberle et al., 2020). Central to Friere’s (1973) pedagogy was the concept of open dialogue and problem-posing approaches. He argued that critical consciousness develops through a process of open dialogue with others, in which people discuss divergent and convergent experiences with societal inequity and opinions about its sources. The available evidence suggests that opportunities and support for this kind of dialogue may indeed be a key contributor to youth’s critical consciousness. Critical consciousness (especially reflection and motivation) tends to be higher for youth whose parents and/or peers engage with them in discussions about social issues, support critical perspectives on injustice, and stress the importance of standing up for one’s beliefs (Bañales et al., 2020; Diemer et al., 2006, 2009; Diemer & Hsieh, 2008; Diemer & Li, 2011; Heberle et al., 2020). Alongside parents and peers, schools and classrooms are another important setting for critical consciousness development. School and classroom climates that support open, critical, and respectful dialogue about political and social issues foster critical consciousness among their students, particularly their critical reflection skills (Heberle et al., 2020). This support can occur at multiple levels through multiple mechanisms, including the overall educational model in place in the school (e.g., progressive schools vs. no excuse schools; e.g., Seider et al., 2016), support from teachers and principals (e.g., Diemer et al., 2009), encouragement and presence of critical educational opportunities (e.g., Clark & Seider, 2017), and the climate in the classroom itself (e.g., Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Rapa et al., 2020b).

For example, in their groundbreaking mixed-methods study of five schools grounded in five different pedagogical models (problem-posing, expeditionary, habits of mind, action civics, and no excuses), Seider and Graves (2020) found that no one model was “best” at fostering overall critical consciousness. Instead, models were more or less effective at promoting different components of it. A common set of features characterized effective teaching for critical consciousness development across these differing pedagogical models. These “teaching tools for critical consciousness” included: (1) introducing theoretical frameworks that unpack and name aspects of oppression; (2) engaging youth themselves to teach others about experiences of injustice; (3) creating opportunities for social action to challenge inequities within youth’s own school community; (4) developing real-world assignments that push youth to exert influence on the world outside school walls; and (5) having teachers’ share their own personal experiences with forces of oppression. These teaching tools were successfully employed across a variety

of contexts and settings within each school, including the core academic curriculum and elective courses, along with extracurricular programs, clubs, and events, and school community assemblies and gatherings.

In addition to the climate and overall pedagogical approach of the school and classroom as a whole, qualitative work has described how specific curricular interventions foster youth critical consciousness, again with particular influence on critical reflection (Heberle et al., 2020). The specific focus of the curricular intervention – whether literature and the arts, science, social science and ethnic studies, civic education, sex education, or cross-curricular – does not seem to matter as much as its inherent pedagogical processes. As Heberle and colleagues note, dialogic instruction that is developmentally appropriate, connects information to students’ lived experiences of injustice, encourages dialogue and critique through open-ended questioning, and challenges bias is the critical ingredient that seems particularly effective in promoting critical consciousness development. Similarly, culturally-responsive pedagogy and ethnic studies programs that emphasize critical thinking, feature the historical, literary, and social contributions of marginalized groups, and tackle controversial topics such as race, discrimination, and socioeconomic inequality through a critical lens have strong potential to foster critical consciousness in youth. They have been shown to boost academic achievement as well (an excellent example is the now banned Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, Arizona; Cabrera, et al., 2014).

**The Chapters in Part I** School-based settings (and their pedagogical features) clearly function as centrally important contexts in youth’s critical consciousness development, and are especially relevant given the salience of school itself as a primary context and setting of youth development. In Part I of this volume, we present three chapters that extend and enhance our understanding of school-based pedagogical tools and curricular programs and their role in fostering critical consciousness. Building off prior knowledge in this area, they introduce new perspectives on the ways school-based contexts inform critical consciousness. In Chapter 1, Daren Graves, Aaliyah El-Amin, and Scott Seider delve more deeply into the notion of teaching tools for critical consciousness. Overlaying Picower’s (2009) “tools of whiteness” framework on observational data from a handful of teachers, they detail the traps and pitfalls that even well-meaning and critically conscious white teachers fall into when seeking to support the critical consciousness development of their Black and Brown students. They then provide examples of how white teachers – who make up 79% of the United States teaching force (Pew Research Center, 2021) – can overcome these barriers and create counter-spaces of liberation. Chapters 2 and 3 shift the focus from teacher practices to curricular programs, delving into two specific widespread civics approaches that may be relevant for critical consciousness development. They draw

important theoretical and empirical links between more broadly implemented school-based civics interventions and critical consciousness development. In Chapter 2, Parissa Ballard, Elena Maker Castro, Julianna Karras, Scott Warren, and Alison Cohen describe the action civics program Generation Citizen. Using the program's theory of change and products from youth participants, they compare programmatic elements of Generation Citizen against core elements of critical consciousness development to elucidate how this program, and others like it, may support youth's critical consciousness. Finally, in Chapter 3, Kathryn Morgan and Brian Christens build on the conceptual connections between action civics programs and critical consciousness described in Chapter 2. They use quantitative and qualitative data to empirically demonstrate that participation in Design Your Neighborhood, another action civics program emphasizing local and community embeddedness, can promote youth critical consciousness, in nuanced ways.

## Part II: Extracurricular Contexts

**Summary of Current Knowledge** We focus next on intervention programs and other extracurricular contexts that can foster critical consciousness. Extracurricular interventions specifically designed to promote youth's critical consciousness are also fairly prevalent in the current literature. Whether they occur during the school day or as out-of-school-time programs, these are stand-alone programs targeting critical consciousness that take place outside of school's core instructional activities. These programs leverage approaches such as critical media pedagogy, ethnic studies, youth participatory action research (YPAR), theater and the arts, and service learning and often use similar dialogic approaches to the ones described earlier to help youth notice, critically reflect upon, and challenge injustice (Heberle et al., 2020). In their review, Watts and Hipólito-Delgado (2015) identified three types of activities as central to efforts to raise critical consciousness in these kinds of interventions: (1) fostering awareness and reflection of sociopolitical circumstances through small group discussion (with critically conscious group leaders) (see also Ginwright & James, 2002; Youniss & Yates, 1997); (2) encouraging critical questioning; and (3) promoting collective identity. However, Watts and Hipólito-Delgado (2015) also identified an important gap in this work so far: that much less attention has been paid to actually engaging in critical action as a means to foster critical consciousness development. They thus identified youth community organizing – where young people come together to identify and discuss common interests, mobilize their peers, and engage in action to address school and community-based quality of life and social justice issues (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012) – as a promising strategy to bridge the gap between critical reflection and action.

**The Chapters in Part II** Based on the above, it is safe to say that most programs designed specifically to foster critical consciousness are more or less successful at doing so, particularly when it comes to critical reflection. The three chapters in Part II of this volume are devoted to understanding what happens in the context of extracurricular programs that are not necessarily designed with critical consciousness goals in mind. The chapters in this section explore if, when, and how more general types of extracurricular programming may also serve as settings for critical consciousness development. This is critically important as we seek to develop consciousness-raising systems (Heberle et al., 2020) and expand opportunities for youth to grow this important developmental and societal competency. In Chapter 4, Edmond Bowers, Candice Bolding, Lidia Monjaras-Gaytan, and Bernadette Sánchez re-envision the “Big Three” model of effective out-of-school time programming (positive and sustained relationships, activities to develop and practice life skills, and meaningful opportunities for youth) in light of social justice youth development principles (Ginwright & James, 2002) and critical consciousness theory. They offer a synthesized model through which out-of-school programs can scaffold youth of color to recognize and challenge oppression, and sound a call to action for practitioners, policy makers, and scholars. In Chapter 5, Deanna Ibrahim, Andrew Nalani, and Erin Godfrey zero in on participation in the arts and arts programming as a potentially relevant and under-tapped setting of critical consciousness development. They draw conceptual links between arts participation and critical consciousness skills and components, detailing how and why arts participation of various kinds may support youth’s critical consciousness development and then use survey data to provide empirical evidence of these associations among youth of color. Finally, in Chapter 6, Shabnam Javdani, Erin Godfrey, Christina Ducat, and Selima Jumarali examine the potential role of service-learning approaches as a context of critical consciousness development, an area that has received limited attention in the critical consciousness literature. They articulate distinctions between service-learning and *critical* service-learning approaches and describe one such critical approach, the Resilience, Opportunity, Safety, Education, and Strength (ROSES) community-based advocacy program. They specify how particular features of ROSES are likely to promote each component of critical consciousness among educationally privileged university students. Using pre–post survey data, they find that ROSES is connected to noteworthy shifts in student’s critical reflection, motivation, and action.

### Part III: Societal Contexts

**Summary of Current Knowledge** Finally, we turn to a consideration of how broader societal contexts, particularly those of marginalization and oppression, can influence youth’s critical consciousness development. In recent

years, scholars have begun to unpack the relationship between critical consciousness development and societal contexts of ethnic and racial marginalization, oppression, and identity development (Cervantes-Soon, 2012; Diemer & Li, 2011; Kelly, 2018; Roy et al., 2019). This research generally supports the notion that critical consciousness is higher among youth with personal exposure to oppressive systems, including personal experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination, racial microaggressions, exclusionary school disciplinary practices, and police and community violence. Scholars have also begun to conceptually and empirically explore connections between critical consciousness development, ethnic/racial identity development, and ethnic-racial socialization (Bañales et al., 2020, 2021; Mathews et al., 2020). This is an exciting new area of growth for critical consciousness scholarship and one that can be meaningfully expanded to include additional contexts of marginalization and oppression (e.g., nativism, heterosexism, ableism, classism) and their intersections (Godfrey & Burson, 2018).

**The Chapters in Part III** In Part III, we share four chapters that build on this nascent work to more deeply consider how specific societal contexts, such as race, racism, nativism, and immigration, inform youth's critical consciousness development. Although these contexts are foundational to the critical consciousness perspective, surprisingly little work conceptualizes or delineates how specific systems of marginalization and privilege might uniquely shape critical consciousness development for youth. Thus, important questions remain about the extent to which critical consciousness develops differently for youth facing different contexts and intersections of marginalization (e.g., Godfrey & Burson, 2018) and whether it develops in domain-specific or domain-general ways (e.g., Diemer et al., 2015, 2016; see also Rapa & Godfrey, in press[b]). In Chapter 7, Joesfina Bañales, Adriana Aldana, and Elan Hope focus specifically on the context of race. They share their newly developed model of critical race consciousness, detailing the specific processes through which Black, Brown, and white youth come to critically reflect on race as a unique system of oppression and challenge its manifestations. Their model is rooted in critical consciousness and sociopolitical development perspectives, but delineates different processes and pathways that better describe the work of reflecting on and resisting *racism* per se. In Chapter 8, Elan Hope, Channing Mathews, Alexis Briggs, and Anitra Alexander further take up the societal context of race, focusing on experiences of racism and their connection to critical action. Reminding us that racism is a system of oppression that manifests through culture, institutions, and individuals and creates acute and chronic stress responses, they recast critical action as an adaptive coping response to racist experiences, broaden its conceptualization, and provide a systematic review of research on racism and critical action among racially marginalized youth.

Chapters 9 and 10 invoke a societal context of marginalization that has received considerably less attention in critical consciousness scholarship to date: that of nativism, immigration, and documentation. In Chapter 9, Germán Cadenas, Rafael Martínez Orozco, and Carlos Aguilar review the ways in which immigration and documentation status uniquely intersect with daily contexts of school, work, family, and community to create uniquely marginalizing – but also critical consciousness-promoting – experiences for undocumented immigrants. They also draw on historical perspectives to craft a critical review of immigration policy as a specific and intentional context of marginalization immigrants must navigate. Finally, in Chapter 10, María Alejandra Arce, Claudia Delbasso, and Gabriel Kuperminc conceptualize processes of critical consciousness development unique to the context of immigration. They describe how certain features of the immigrant experience, particularly sense of social responsibility, immigrant bargain, and immigrant optimism, interplay with experiences of marginalization and contribute in unique and unexplored ways to immigrant youth's critical consciousness development.

#### IN SUMMARY AND SOLIDARITY

Youth today face a sociopolitical moment in which the systems of oppression that have long patterned American society are in bold relief. Critical consciousness is fundamental to helping youth navigate and resist these oppressions, and in contributing to the fight for justice and liberation. Amidst this landscape, the chapters in this volume expand our understanding of the settings and contexts of youth's critical consciousness development. They provide new perspectives on how the major contexts of youth's lives can function to support and enhance critical consciousness, and form a blueprint for future scholarship. We invite you to engage with these ideas. We hope they open up new ways of thinking and novel intervention possibilities, stimulate the imagination, and add to the growing scholarly and practical knowledge needed to understand and promote this important developmental and societal competency.

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