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Situating Critical Consciousness Within the Developmental System

Insights from the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory

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The framework of critical consciousness (CC) has contributed to theoretical and practical progress in understanding how young people resist and undo oppression – experiences of marginalization from social institutions (e.g., health, education) that affect all aspects of life (Diemer et al., 2016; Heberle et al., 2020). CC draws largely from the works of Paulo Freire (1972, 1998, 2014, 2016). Freire, working within the context of South American class struggles (Holst, 2006), wrote about CC as a way that individuals can be empowered to transform reality by engaging in "reading the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987). It was important to Freire that individuals understood the historical, sociocultural, and political contours of the settings they were in so they could discern how systems of oppression influenced their daily realities. More recently, scholars have applied the concept of CC by reflecting on the struggles of young people of color against oppression in the US context. To "read the world" in the context of a nation-state founded on white supremacy and settler colonialism (Saito, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012) is to perceive the dominant narratives around individualism, meritocracy, and color-evasiveness that permeate the fabric of society.

In the CC framework, oppression is not insurmountable (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011); individuals can use their power to interrogate oppression (critical reflection) and take part in actions to dismantle it (critical action). These two components form the praxis of CC, wherein thinking and doing reciprocally and iteratively interact to pave the way for liberation. The proliferation of research on CC has expanded our understanding of how youth engage in CC, its implications for other developmental domains (e.g., educational achievement; Cadenas et al., 2018; Seider et al., 2019), and how CC can be supported (e.g., in community-based organizations; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007).

The widespread adoption of the CC framework within fields of study that focus on young people (Heberle et al., 2020) suggests that researchers – either

explicitly or implicitly – believe that young people who experience oppression can enact resilience, resistance, and, ultimately, liberation as outcomes that are important to development (both individual and collective). Yet, the CC framework itself does not focus on development, so it could be expanded and enriched through integration with other theories that emphasize individuals as existing within developmental systems.

In this chapter, we examine CC through the lens of the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST; Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015), a theoretical framework rooted in developmental systems. PVEST shares several underlying assumptions and emphases with the CC framework, including explicitly centering oppression and privilege as features of young people's contexts, acknowledging the inequities in developmental contexts as factors that influence – but do not determine – young peoples' lives, and emphasizing the agency that they have to cope with and change their contexts. At the same time, PVEST contains other foci that can help enrich CC theory and research, including an emphasis on the multiple layers of youth's contexts and the meaning that they make of those contexts.

Given these features, linking PVEST with CC draws attention to the ways CC theory – and, by extension, research – may be expanded to align with a contextualized, developmental, and dynamic lens on young people's lives. Other developmental theories could productively be used in combination with the CC framework, and we hope other scholars will use the ideas we present here as a starting point to pursue that work.

The outline of the chapter is as follows. First, we give a brief overview of PVEST. Then, we describe four recommendations for how PVEST might be used to expand our thinking about and use of the CC framework: (1) considering the larger developmental context of CC; (2) addressing meaning-making as a primary process within contexts; (3) considering changes in CC; and (4) focusing on the dynamic nature of CC, including emphasizing praxis and considering CC processes as collective. Within each of these four sections, we highlight research that sheds light on these recommendations and provide actionable suggestions for how these recommendations can be used in future research.

Overview of the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)

PVEST (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015) extends other ecological theories of human development – such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and García Coll's integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children (García Coll et al., 1996) – by incorporating how intersubjective experience influences the impact contexts have on development. According to PVEST, the multiple

interacting levels of context that the person is embedded in (e.g., microsystem, macrosystem; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and the social positions that individuals occupy (e.g., race, gender; García Coll et al., 1996) are not deterministic of developmental outcomes. Instead, phenomenology – how individuals interpret and make meaning of self, others, experiences, and environment – plays a key role (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015). The development of the person (e.g., increasing cognitive capacities) shapes phenomenological processes, and the individuals' meaning-making in turn impacts their development by influencing how they interact with their context. Accordingly, individuals with similar social locations can have notably different developmental trajectories (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015). This nondeterministic view of development is important for countering deficit-based views of groups who experience oppression (e.g., youth of color) and for considering how young people's strengths may support them to transform their own and others' lives.

We describe PVEST in more detail by describing five different "angles" the theory presents with respect to the developmental process (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015). In PVEST, each angle is a moment in the entire view of human development and therefore operates in concert with all other angles. Development does not begin with the first angle and end with the last in a linear fashion; adjacent angles influence each other bidirectionally, and the five parts form a cyclical model that is recursive. Nevertheless, the angles must be separated in order to describe each one. We begin our discussion with the first angle, which attends to the contextual features of the developing person.

1. **Net Vulnerability:** The first angle of PVEST, *net vulnerability*, captures the balance between risk and protective factors for development. Net vulnerability is defined as the sum of all the supports that individuals may have access to, minus the potential stressors within individuals and their environments. Accordingly, it captures the level of developmental challenges for each person. For people who experience marginalization, systems of oppression can contribute to a high presence of potential risk factors in their developmental context. For example, youth of color may be exposed to negative influences on their development due to racism, such as living in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty (Reardon et al., 2015), attending underfunded schools (Morgan, 2018), and experiencing discrimination within the justice system (Rovner, 2016). In contrast, they may also have access to individual, family, and community protective characteristics that can offset these elements of stress. For example, their neighborhoods may have strong social ties between members (Chung & Docherty, 2011), and teachers or other adults may be highly involved in their lives (Herrera et al., 2011; Suldo et al., 2009).

2. **Net Stress:** The second angle of PVEST is *net stress*, which builds on net vulnerability to incorporate the idea that how individuals make meaning of self and context affects their actual experience of the developmental system they are embedded in. Accordingly, the individual perceives the net level of vulnerability (i.e., the balance of potential risk factors versus potential protective factors) and interprets it; this interpretation is the actual level of stress that the person experiences. Due to differences in their phenomenological experiences, individuals with similar net vulnerabilities can have different experiences of net stress.

   Overall, the net vulnerability present within an individual's developmental system is not seen as a certain detriment to development; rather, the individual has experiences that can present potential challenges or facilitators (i.e., net stress) for their development. For example, because racism is a risk factor for youth of color, they may have specific experiences of racism in their everyday lives (e.g., having a derogatory remark directed at them) that act as stressors. Negative impacts of stressors can be mitigated by supports at the individual level (e.g., positive feelings about one's ethnic/racial membership, or private regard; Neblett et al., 2012) or within their surroundings (e.g., presence of cultural assets, such as familism; Romero et al., 2020). In addition, stressors do not always lead to negative outcomes and could actually facilitate development. For example, the "stress" of transitioning to a new school may prompt youth to learn new ways of interacting with peers. Thus, stress can generate meaningful challenges that spur growth.
3. **Reactive Coping Processes:** The third angle of PVEST is *reactive coping processes*. These refer to the strategies that young people engage in to counteract the stress that is perceived and interpreted from the net level of vulnerability in their developmental system. These coping processes are deployed to reduce states of dissonance for the individual and may be adaptive or maladaptive in various ways. Some strategies may be immediately helpful but have negative long-term consequences, and some strategies may be productive in one context but counterproductive in another. As an example, aggression may be the most logical mode of coping in an oppressive neighborhood context with high levels of poverty, crime, and police presence, but it can result in punitive actions in the classroom context (Harris et al., 2019). Because reactive coping processes are but one angle within PVEST, they should not be labeled as "pathological" or "problematic" without taking into account the larger context (i.e., net vulnerability) as well as how they made meaning of their situation (i.e., net level of stress).
4. **Emergent Identities:** The fourth angle of PVEST is *emergent identities*. Over time, youth may repeat the reactive coping strategies that were most successful, and these strategies may become stable responses that are a recurrent part of the way they interact with the world. In this way, coping

reactions can become internalized as part of young people's self-conceptualizations. For example, sustained civic engagement as a coping strategy can support the development of a sense of social responsibility and orientation toward activism (Hope & Spencer, 2017). Among young people of color, engagement in antiracist activism as a way to promote justice for themselves and their peers may also shape their sense of racial identity (Mathews et al., 2019), such as through strengthening the sense of private regard they feel about their group. In turn, these developing identities reciprocally influence their coping processes by changing how they make meaning of self, others, and context (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015). For example, a strengthened sense of private regard for one's racial group can change the net stress felt by the young person in the face of racism they encounter in some situations.

5. **Stage-Specific Coping Outcomes:** The fifth angle is *stage-specific coping outcomes*. Emergent identities may stabilize how individuals cope with the net stress that they perceive in their developmental system and, accordingly, produce adverse and/or productive outcomes (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015). These outcomes (and which aspects are considered adverse or productive) are specific to particular developmental periods. For adolescents, important outcomes are related to current and future educational and work plans, developing positive relationships, and engaging in health-promoting behaviors (among others). Research has shown that aspects of civic engagement and CC may promote these positive outcomes. For example, among youth of color in the US, commitment to helping others and fighting inequality were positively associated with vocational expectations (Diemer et al., 2010), and critical reflection about inequality positively predicted academic achievement (Seider et al., 2019). Some aspects of CC may also have adverse outcomes for youth: for example, activism has also been associated with health-risk behaviors (Ballard et al., 2019), and, among Black college students, high engagement in political activism may magnify experiences of microaggressions, with negative consequences for mental health (Hope et al., 2018). These outcomes feed back into young people's level of vulnerability: for example, higher levels of academic achievement may serve as a protective factor, whereas higher levels of symptoms of depression or anxiety may increase vulnerability.

CC AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL SYSTEM: INSIGHTS FROM PVEST

In the rest of the chapter, we explore how the framework of CC may be extended to better integrate with the understanding of young people as embedded within developmental systems. Drawing on the implications of

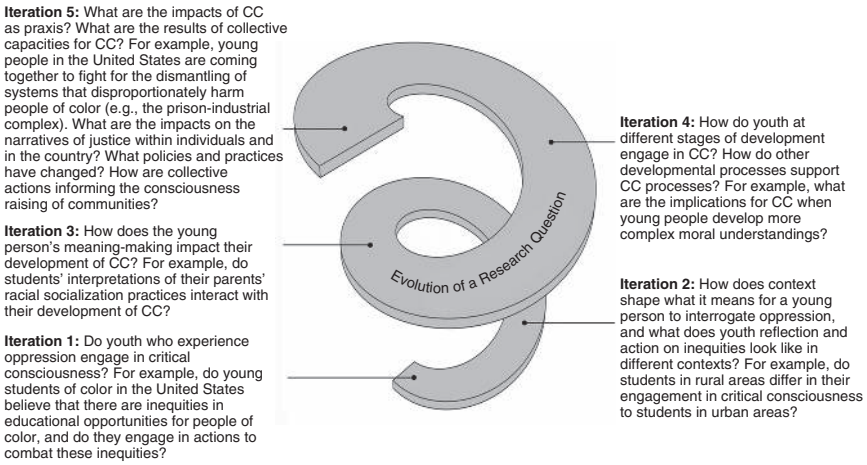

FIGURE 2.1 The evolution of a research question using the CC framework over multiple iterations. In each iteration, the research agenda reflects a CC framework that is more deeply integrated within developmental systems theory.

the five angles of PVEST described herein, we outline specific recommendations for how CC scholarship may be extended so that it accounts for how individuals exist within developmental systems. We also consider how each recommendation might influence research using the CC framework. In Figure 2.1, we present a helix depicting the possible evolution of a single CC-based research question over the course of five iterations. In the first iteration, we outline a research question that has been explored extensively within the existing CC research body (Heberle et al., 2020): Do youth who experience oppression engage in CC? In subsequent iterations (i.e., iterations 2 to 5), we propose additional research questions that build upon the recommendations in this chapter.

ADDRESSING THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT IN CC

In the first recommendation, we consider how CC theory may address the role of context in ways that are more aligned with PVEST, a developmental systems theory. CC is fundamentally about the relationship between an individual and their context; more specifically, it is about how one analyzes and transforms the ways that systems of privilege and oppression embedded within contexts shape their opportunities and outcomes (Diemer et al., 2016; Freire, 2016; Watts et al., 2011). Indeed, a major strength of the CC perspective is the focus on the impact a critical understanding of context can have on one's life. Context is intimately entwined within the CC perspective, and the

CC framework would not exist (it would disintegrate, so to speak) without the idea of context. Nevertheless, we propose that an advanced integration of CC with ideas of development requires that the CC framework take into account how context has implications for all other processes within a developmental system, including CC processes themselves. Furthermore, we suggest that our understanding of CC can be enhanced by analyzing the role of context – either by examining through a grounded approach how CC unfolds in specific settings, or by analyzing how variation between contexts impact CC processes.

PVEST can help us expand our conceptualization of CC to include the role of context (as articulated in developmental systems theories) on the CC processes. As it is built upon ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), PVEST considers all levels of a person's ecology, ranging from the microsystem to the chronosystem, as influencing individuals' development. For example, the first "angle" of PVEST of net vulnerability highlights that youth's contexts all have strengths and challenges. The angles in PVEST are a cyclical process that feed back onto each other, so that the net vulnerabilities in the context are "infused" throughout the rest of the developmental system. Therefore, according to PVEST, it is vitally important to consider the location within the developmental system at which CC is occurring. Looking at CC through PVEST, we are also encouraged to incorporate information about the specificity of the contexts into our conceptualization of CC. How a young person engages in CC is likely unique to the specific space and time within which the young person is located, and this both constrains and opens up possibilities as to what transformations the individual (or collective) can enact through CC.

An important direction for CC research is to consider how the specific context a young person is embedded in influences their CC. Many recent studies using a CC framework have been conducted in urban areas in the United States among youth who are racially and economically marginalized, mostly youth in school-based settings (Heberle et al., 2020). In these studies, acknowledging structural obstacles for some people toward gaining a good education is considered an important indicator of understanding how oppression operates in the US context. This analysis directly counters racist notions about people of color not having success because they are less intelligent and less hardworking, and it accordingly is considered an important indicator of CC (specifically, of critical reflection). Researchers' assessment of CC processes needs to be responsive to context, as CC likely manifests in different ways depending on the specific social location of the individual, as well as their geography, history, and culture. For example, in some settings, discerning the harmful ideologies that are held up to support caste systems; ethnic, religious, or linguistic systems of oppression; and/or ongoing territorial expansion may be crucial. In the beginning of the helix, where there is

a shift from iteration 1 to iteration 2 (Figure 2.1), we explore the research questions that may arise from considering context more directly.

Although we do not discount the importance of research findings among US youth, we suggest that CC research has lacked attention to how multiple levels of youth's specific contexts have influenced their CC development. The PVEST framework, through its emphasis on multiple integrated levels of context, helps us to clarify how inequality and oppression are passed through developmental systems. For example, for many US youth who experience marginalization, their CC may need to respond to the legacy of white supremacy (macrosystem) embedded within institutions like the educational and legal systems (exosystem) in ways specific to the era post-*Brown* v. *Board of Education* (chronosystem). Further, their enactment of CC needs to be responsive to the proximal settings young people are in, such as the classroom (microsystem). Future research could investigate critical reflection of and critical action against different levels of the system: for example, what are the differences between critical reflection of how oppression is upheld within immediate settings we are in, such as schools and neighborhoods, versus how oppression is perpetuated in present-day geopolitical activities? It is important, moreover, to examine how engagement in CC may be recursively shaping the settings youth are embedded in, whether through policy changes, cultural shifts, or other social phenomena.

Much of the existing literature has been guided by an etic perspective, where the researcher bounds the measurement and analysis of CC with their (the researcher's) understanding of what it means to be critically reflective or critically active. This methodological enclosing is evident in quantitative research, where the constructs of CC are defined and operationalized by the researcher. It is less evident, but still present, in qualitative research when researchers code data using their own analysis of the world (i.e., their own CC) as a frame of reference. An example of CC research that has taken an emic perspective is the mixed methods study conducted by Baker and Brookins (2014), in which they used photovoice to discern how rural youth in El Salvador discuss the issues affecting them and their communities. The photovoice results informed the development of a scale that was then administered to youth in various settings in El Salvador. In this particular research setting, young people articulated a role for local government (and police) in solving issues such as pollution while criticizing the ways these power-holding institutions discriminate against the poor. This articulation of critical reflection is complex in that youth are holding local official structures accountable for improving their communities while, at the same time, pinpointing how these institutions perpetuate economic marginalization. In the quantitative portion of the study, we see that the effectiveness of local official structures is an important factor for CC within these communities and that critical action in such settings may appear as "changing public policy" or "making reforms

within the current system." Both the emphasis on well-functioning government-related bodies as community-based sociopolitical efficacy and the emphasis on reforms and change within existing systems as critical action are unique to this setting.

Another way to account for context in CC research is to design multilevel studies that introduce and account for variation in context. This allows for analyses that capture how changes in context are related to CC, and can inform the relationship between CC processes and context. The explicit modeling of context through multilevel designs can occur at various levels of the ecological system. For example, Seider and colleagues (2018) examined how distinct pedagogical models as carried out by different schools related to youth CC development. In the current US context, for example, legislative action against teaching "critical race theory" in schools is deepening disparities in opportunities for civic education (Pollock et al., 2022). This may have implications for the development of CC for youth, as research has shown that civic education is critical for supporting growth in youth's self-efficacy about taking part in sociopolitical action (Dassonneville et al., 2012). Other microsystem settings, such as neighborhoods, may influence CC in profound ways that are yet unexamined. For example, in one study, African American youth perceived the amount of social support and cohesion in their neighborhoods to be higher when the neighborhood had higher concentrations of African American residents (Hurd et al., 2013). This was further related to having fewer internalizing symptoms, but it is possible that such neighborhood-level factors can influence CC-related processes as well, such as whether youth feel they can make changes in their community. As youth settings are comprised of multiple layered elements (families, schools, peer groups, neighborhoods, and so on), it will be important to examine variations within contexts that are of a similar kind (e.g., variation in peer groups) as well as to examine multiple systems at once in tiered, multilevel designs.

Variation within Contexts in CC Processes: The Role of Meaning-Making

A defining feature of PVEST as a developmental systems theory is its emphasis on how intersubjective experience influences the impact contexts have on development. As noted, PVEST supplements other theories of human development – such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and García Coll's integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children (García Coll et al., 1996) – with a phenomenological component. By positing the sense that individuals make of interactions with their environment as one way in which the developmental context plays a role in developmental trajectories, PVEST outlines how the context comes to be integrated within internal processes.

The phenomenology aspect enables PVEST to maintain a strengths-based view of youth who experience marginalization, even while having as a foundational assumption how oppressive structures pose vulnerabilities for development. PVEST maintains that youth experiencing similar contexts may differ in how they make meaning of that context, thereby creating variation within individuals or groups that otherwise share similar positions in society. The vulnerability inherent in a young person's developmental system due to exposure to multiple forces of oppression does not determine that they inevitably face crises and deprivation; instead, the meaning-making can alter the course of the individual's life. The CC framework, and research based on it, may be enhanced by addressing phenomenology as something that connects the external and the internal in lived experiences.

One way in which a focus on phenomenology can enrich CC research is through a re-examination of critical reflection. As a main component of CC, it is typically conceptualized as an assessment of the systemic roots of existing inequalities. Accordingly, it is distinct from PVEST-related phenomenology, which encompasses more generally the interpretations of one's interaction with the environment. Bringing these two ideas together could move us away from the typical conceptualization of critical reflection as a static fact or generalized assessment that one has about the world and toward a view of critical reflection as one form or type of meaning-making that allows individuals to imagine acting on their context in a way that tackles oppression. With that view, we can better envision how young people may become equipped to interpret a dynamic and ever-changing world with critical reflection.

Viewing critical reflection as a *form* or *type* of meaning-making also highlights the idea that it may be connected to other meaning-making processes. In other words, youth's views of the historical, sociocultural, and political roots of oppression are likely shaped by (and shape) how they interpret other aspects of their lives. For example, a young person's interrogation of how disparities in educational opportunities impact the lives of people of color may be influenced by how they interpret the parental socialization they receive around race and culture. In one study among Black adolescents, critical reflection about racial gaps in educational achievement was positively related to youth's perceptions of their parents' racial socialization (preparation for bias and racial pride socialization) and parents' own critical reflection (Bañales et al., 2020). However, parents' own reports of racial socialization were not associated with increases in youth's critical reflection; this pattern of results emphasizes the important role of youth's own interpretations of their parents' socialization efforts.

The phenomenological perspective of PVEST can also enrich CC work by highlighting how engagement in CC may become differentiated within groups of individuals who share social identities. Young people of color may begin their CC process with internalizations of racism that attribute the kind

of person they are (e.g., a "high" or "low" achiever) to the limitations they face in their education. A subgroup that begins to understand the ways structural racism disproportionately constrains opportunities for racialized groups may engage in coping strategies (e.g., identifying collective strategies for fighting oppression) which are then solidified into different aspects of identity (e.g., an activist identity). As outlined in angle 4, according to PVEST, this new identity can impact the subgroups' subsequent experiences of racism in ways that can prompt further development of CC (for instance, they may become less likely to engage in victim blaming). Meanwhile, their peers who are less engaged in CC processes may set out on a different trajectory in terms of the coping strategies they utilize and the identities that they commit to. While CC processes outline how young people make sense of the world, phenomenology allows us to outline how the world, as viewed through CC, comes to be instilled in the person as developmental system.

A third way that phenomenology may play a part in CC is related to intermediary processes between reflection and action, such as sociopolitical self-efficacy (sometimes also called political efficacy or critical motivation; Watts et al., 2011). Sociopolitical self-efficacy refers to whether the individual feels they can enact successful actions in the sociopolitical domain (often measured using the Sociopolitical Control Scale; Diemer & Li, 2011; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). The potential for sociopolitical self-efficacy to empower young people may depend on how they are making meaning of other parts of their developmental system. For example, Uriostegui and colleagues (2021) found that youth's sociopolitical self-efficacy was related to engagement in academic and career activities both through encouragement by important individuals (e.g., role models) and through perceived pressure from family. Encouragement was related to a higher frequency of activities important to academic and career success, but pressure was related to disengagement from such activities. These findings highlight how youth's perception of various supports and barriers in their contexts impact the ways in which sociopolitical self-efficacy may shape developmental outcomes.

CONSIDERING CHANGES IN CC

Why do some people not like the Quiché? This was the question that Quintana and Segura-Herrera (2003) asked young children in Guatemala during the last years of the brutal 36-year civil war and closely following the signing of peace agreements in 1996. In their study, the researchers found that younger children (average grade 2.1) made ingroup-blaming statements such as "because they have dirty clothes" or "because we do not speak like they [the Ladinos, or European-descendant people] do" while older children (average grade 3.5) instead made statements such as "because the Ladinos have

killed our ancestors, have mistreated, and humiliated them, now they [Quichés] do not appear very well to Ladinos."

We share this example to highlight the importance of attending to changes over time in CC research. The subgroup of younger children made statements about their own group that reflect a lack of understanding for how the historical context may explain the lower social class of the Quiché at present. However, the older children were able to both recount a history of ill-treatment of Quiché as well as speak to the fact that the Ladinos are the ones who are holding prejudicial views. In the study, the researchers also found that ethnic pride was high for the youngest Quiché children; it decreased considerably as children reached an average grade level of 2.8 and then increased again. Considering the axis of time within CC research means considering parallel developmental processes, such as changes in ethnic identity – processes that may have complex relations with CC. In the current example, both the children with low and high critical reflection manifested high ethnic pride, suggesting that identity processes occurring alongside CC are nonlinear, with distinct functions for elements like ethnic pride at different moments of CC.

Overall, there are at least two distinct ways that time as a component of the developmental system can be incorporated into CC theory. One important thing to consider in future work is how CC differs across multiple points in the developmental continuum (i.e., how CC varies by age) and how other developmental processes that are unfolding are interrelated with CC. Another way that CC research can attend to changes over time is by considering the variation in which parts of the CC process are more static and trait-like versus which parts are more fluid and state-like (and how these may interrelate; see Tyler et al., Chapter 9 [this volume]). Development also has implications for supporting the action component of CC due to the fact that roles within established political institutions are circumscribed by age (e.g., age limits on voting).

Looking at CC across the developmental continuum is important as how CC is enacted by younger children is likely different from what older adolescents do because a person's biophysical, social-emotional, and cognitive development shape and constrain CC enactment. As individuals develop, new capacities emerge that may support CC. For example, abstract thinking is likely crucial to CC, as one must hold up analyses of societal structures against concepts such as equity in order to practice critical reflection and critical action. However, abstract thinking usually does not emerge until around age eleven or twelve (Dumontheil, 2014). Ancillary developmental processes may also shape the consequences of CC over time. For example, Yu and colleagues (2019) found that among eight-year-olds, high critical reflection was related to poor outcomes. The young children in their study who perceived that their group may experience challenges because of their race had lower academic

achievement as well as poor adjustment (high hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, and conduct problems). This finding of a negative relationship between CC and other developmental outcomes is different from findings among the literature with older adolescents. For example, Bowers et al. (2020) found that critical reflection among college students was related to positive outcomes, and more so for older students. For the young children in Yu et al. (2019), a dissonance between pride about their identity and their knowledge of how their group is treated in society may explain the poor outcomes. For older adolescents, a reconciliation between one's positive self-regard and critical reflection may be occurring (Spencer, 1999), and may explain why CC relates to positive outcomes. It will be important for future studies to examine the factors – such as specific racial socialization practices – that support youth to hold both a strong sense of self and a critical understanding of inequities and injustices their group faces within society.

Understanding the interrelationship between CC and other developmental processes is also important for the design of interventions to support growth in CC. Ilten-Gee and Manchanda (2021) explore in detail how young people's development as understood through the lens of social domain theory (Smetana et al., 2014) may interact with their CC, with implications for classroom practice. According to social domain theory, children coordinate concerns in three domains when making decisions and judgments that are social or moral in nature: the domain of conventions or rules; the personal domain, which includes the development of self-concept and identity; and the moral domain of considering the harmful versus helpful consequences of actions. Furthermore, as children grow older, they experience shifts in each of the three domains. Understanding these developmental shifts across social domains may inform the developmental appropriateness of interventions designed to support CC development. For example, it is only around grades 5–6 that children begin to understand that rules can have exceptions (shift in conventional domain) and that accommodations such as limitations on individual autonomy may need to be made in order to pursue fairness (a shift in the moral domain). This development could support dialogue in the classroom that fosters CC development. For example, an educator may highlight the convention of having single-sex bathrooms and ask students to bring up why this may create an unfair environment for some people. Students could then learn about more inclusive bathroom arrangements and how this may support belonging for transgender people, among others. In their paper, Ilten-Gee and Manchanda (2021) provide other ideas for lessons that highlight the contradictions and power dynamics of society and opportunities for students to resolve them that are appropriate for different developmental periods.

Freire and some early interpretations of his work proposed stage-like models of CC. However, Watts and colleagues (2003), in their interviews with young African American men, came to the conclusion that sociopolitical

development, as a process where individuals become increasingly engaged in CC, may be a developmental process that is more dynamic than such a stage-like model can account for. Watts et al. (2003) saw sociopolitical development as consisting of "transactions . . . a cumulative and recursive process where future transactions are guided and given meaning by previous ones, and future ones can alter the interpretation of past ones" (p. 192). Indeed, they highlight how an experience such as attending a workshop can lead to very distinct trajectories of CC depending on the person's "experience venue, aspects of the self, social influences, significant events, and functioning in an organizational role" (p. 192). It is possible that CC is a complex combination of an overall state with more fluid components that respond to specific situations. Future research could use modeling strategies based on latent state–trait theory (Steyer et al., 2012) to uncover these nuances.

CAPTURING THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF CC: HIGHLIGHTING PRAXIS AND THE COLLECTIVE

Viewing CC from the lens of PVEST drives us to (re)consider the dynamic nature of CC. PVEST conceptualizes development as inherently nonstatic, because individuals make meaning of their environment and themselves in ways that shape how they interact with the environment. Their actions on their context are reflected in their subsequent meaning-making, in a recursive model of development. This understanding of development as a dynamic, continuously evolving process connects well to the concept of praxis within the CC framework: praxis is the interrelationship between critical reflection and critical action.

Freire's original conception of CC (or, more often in his writings, *conscientização* – i.e., conscientization) was founded on the notion of praxis, wherein new understandings of one's reality leads to engagement in interventions to transform the world, which necessitates further reflection. Freire's renderings of how social transformation occurs through praxis is rooted in philosophical foundations emphasizing dialectics (mainly Marxist dialectical materialism); thus, synergy between understanding and action is the path through which those experiencing oppression create liberation.

A phenomenological perspective facilitates a dynamic understanding of CC that emphasizes the notion of praxis. According to PVEST, as individuals interact with the world, their experiences are incorporated into their self-understandings and their interpretations of context, with implications for their identity formation and subsequent interactions with context. In other words, understanding is formed through actions, and actions are taken as a response to new understandings. Many young people are engaged in acts of resistance against oppression, or critical actions. For example, they may be engaged in youth organizing (Kirshner, 2015; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012),

building collective power and working to bring transformative change to issues affecting their communities. Engagement in such movements may mean that they experience successful negotiations of power within systems. As such, critical action can influence subsequent critical reflection – how they make meaning of the world in ways that reveal inequities and injustice. Thus, young people's realization of CC is a dynamic process at the nexus of meaning-making and interaction with context. It is not a unitary, stable process, and instead must focus on how critical actions prompt continuous reinterpretations of their experiences of oppression. As implied within the concept of praxis, individuals' critical reflection may change in an iterative manner in relation to their critical actions, and vice versa.

Despite some endorsement of the notion of praxis within CC at the theoretical level, studies of CC among young people in the United States have largely been conducted using measures that separate reflection and action (Diemer et al., 2015; Heberle et al., 2020). Questions about critical reflection do not ask about the associated action-taking (e.g., What do you think needs to be done about the high rates of unemployment in your neighborhood?), and questions about critical action do not probe the analyses guiding the action or gained through the action (e.g., "Why did you participate in this rally outside the state house?"; "What did you learn about educational justice issues affecting your community by organizing this social media campaign?"). A stronger integration of praxis within CC research may be advanced through developing measures of how young people develop new views of their reality through taking part in actions and how actions can support reframing their understanding of the world. Another way that praxis may be more deeply embedded into CC research endeavors is through a focus on dialogue (and other dialogic encounters) as a tool with which to analyze and understand CC. Freire and liberation psychologists viewed dialogue as a way to enact praxis in relationship with others (Freire, 2014; Montero, 2009). During dialogue, current understandings can be problematized to reveal asymmetries in power relations and create connections between current conditions and systems of oppression and privilege (Montero, 2009; Sánchez Carmen et al., 2015).

A phenomenological perspective may also provide a method in which researchers can better integrate collective understandings of liberation that have been central to CC theory and other work focusing on liberation (Sonn & Montero, 2009). Although this focus on the collective has not received much attention in recent CC scholarship, especially within psychology, the idea of collective liberation is important within both CC and developmental theory. The emphasis on identity within PVEST – and the ways that individuals construct their perceptions of self in interaction with their context – offers a venue in which to incorporate collective experiences of groups. CC research (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015) and many other bodies of scholarship (DiFulvio, 2011; Suyemoto et al., 2015; Terriquez, 2015) show that identifying

with a common struggle of one's people helps individuals develop identities that incorporate a commitment to fighting oppression (Quintana & Segura-Herrera, 2003). For example, when young people have access to counterspaces (Case & Hunter, 2012), they may be able to engage in identity work in community with others such that their experiences of oppression are both affirmed and recrafted to bring about possibilities for resistance. Research on the relations between ethnic identity and empowerment also shows that individuals who have a strong sense of "peoplehood" within a group (Phinney & Ong, 2007) are more likely to have discussions about their context of social oppression, which may inspire collective actions (Flanagan et al., 2009; Gutiérrez, 1995). These examples help us conceptually integrate the importance of a focus on collective processes for adopting coping strategies to react to oppressive environments, developing an emergent identity centered around addressing injustice and making meaning of their experiences in new ways.

Nonetheless, we acknowledge that a shortcoming of our integration of PVEST with CC frameworks is how it continues to limit our understanding of collective processes for liberation. Communities experiencing oppression have, in various moments throughout history, joined together to resist and heal. The experience of oppression (Young, 2011) demands a collective response in many ways. However, PVEST focuses on *individual* experiences as shaping *individual* phenomenological understandings. We assert that solidarity forged across individuals is essential to liberation and therefore cannot be omitted from our theorizing about human development. One rationale for concentrating on the collective experience of groups under oppression is that a focus on individuals directly feeds into the projects of hegemony that we seek to dissemble (French et al., 2020). Many communities of color value interconnectedness and interdependence: for example, Asian cultures emphasize group harmony (Sue et al., 2019), Mexican-origin communities value familismo (Piña-Watson et al., 2019), and many Native American teachings center relationships (Absolon, 2010). Being able to orient toward such collectivist practices runs counter to the many individualistic narratives (e.g., "pull yourself up by your bootstraps") that erode the well-being and power of people. If developmental theories are to include an avenue through which groups will achieve liberation, a focus on the collective must be incorporated. As Freire (2016) observed, "domination is itself objectively divisive" (p. 173), whereas transformation of the world through CC is not an individual act but rather a collective process.

CONCLUSION

The CC framework has formed the basis of important research on how young people contend with and dismantle oppression (Diemer et al., 2016; Heberle et al., 2020). In this chapter, we illustrated how a developmental systems

theory, PVEST (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015), can illuminate new directions for CC scholarship. We described four recommendations for combining the strengths of CC and PVEST, including: (1) considering the broader developmental context of CC (e.g., through multilevel models); (2) addressing meaning-making as a primary process (e.g., through connecting critical reflection to youth's perceptions of other aspects of their contexts); (3) considering changes in CC (e.g., through attending to age-related differences); and (4) focusing on the dynamic nature of CC (e.g., through longitudinal studies of the bidirectional relationships between reflection and action). We offer these recommendations as a starting point for how CC might be situated within a developmental systems theory, and we hope that CC scholars will not only expand on these recommendations but also pursue linkages with other developmentally oriented theories. These theoretical interchanges can help us move CC scholarship forward to capture the contextualized and dynamic ways that young people recognize, grapple with, and dismantle systems of oppression across development.

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