



## **CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN YOUTH: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW**

**Gabriela Monica Assante • Mariana Momanu ••**  
*Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Romania*

### *Abstract*

*Critical consciousness is not a new emerging concept, yet it does not have large visibility in the scientific literature. Its uniqueness resides in the influence of uncovering socio-political contradictions and acting against them. Acknowledging the growing number of researches produced over the years and, the low visibility of the concept, we consider it valuable for the scientific community to have access to a comprehensive review of the role of critical consciousness. Therefore, a systematic review was conducted to investigate the role of critical consciousness development in young people. Teachers and education specialists should recognize its importance and implement educational practices and strategies that would contribute to the development of critical consciousness.*

Keywords: critical consciousness; Freire; youth development

### **Introduction**

The concept of critical consciousness originates from Paulo Freire's ideas (1970) and involves the development of insightful understanding, mainly by uncovering social and political contradictions. This understanding will further develop the capacity to act against oppressive elements present in the life of individuals. Furthermore, critical consciousness involves the ability to reflect on personal biases, work collaboratively with individuals and community participants, take action, and transform existing barriers for an improved quality

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to:

• Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași. Address: Toma Cozma Street, No. 3, 700554, Iași, Romania. E-mail: [monica.assante@uaic.ro](mailto:monica.assante@uaic.ro)

•• Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași. Address: Toma Cozma Street, No. 3, 700554, Iași, Romania. E-mail: [momanu@uaic.ro](mailto:momanu@uaic.ro)

of life (Freire, 1970). Freire emphasised that any movement towards critical consciousness could only be achieved by working together collaboratively. Critical consciousness is the key to critical action, but the nature of the action will correspond to the nature of individuals' understanding (Freire, 2005). Therefore, critical consciousness refers to the ability to analyse, navigate and challenge the oppressive social forces shaping at the same time the life of the individual and the community (Freire, 2005; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2008). Specifically, critical consciousness represents the analysis of socially marginalised individuals of societal inequities and their motivation and actions to change such inequities.

Current formulations of critical consciousness are grounded in Freirean thought and include three main elements: critical reflection, critical motivation (or efficacy), and critical action. The process of developing reflection and action is a central element of critical consciousness theory, mainly because critical consciousness entails a process of learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of social reality. Knowledge of critical consciousness and its components facilitates the process and expands understanding of the concept. Critical reflection entails a process of learning to inquire about social conditions and structures that marginalise groups of people. The perceived capacity and commitment to address injustice refers to critical motivation and entails a process of 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 within a systemic framework. Furthermore, engaging individuals or groups to change perceived injustices is critical action (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). This refers to individual or collective actions 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 organising, and peaceful protests. Critical efficacy refers to the perceived capacity to influence social and political change by either individual or collective activism. It is more likely for people to engage in critical action if they have the feeling that they can determine change.

Critical consciousness has been called an 'antidote to injustice' (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999) because it advances awareness, motivation, and agency to identify, challenge, and change social and structural constraints (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016). Freire viewed the relationship

between reflection and action as reciprocal. Critical reflection is generally considered a precursor to critical action. Individuals do not act to change their social conditions without the awareness that their social conditions are unjust. He theorised that when individuals begin to analyse their social conditions, they feel able and compelled to act towards changing 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, thus creating a circular process of critical consciousness development. However, there will also be times when critical action fails to yield the desired result, which can lead to frustration rather than an increased awareness of societal inequities.

The most prominent elements of critical consciousness theory are advancing awareness of socio-political circumstances, encouraging critical questioning, and fostering collective identity (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Therefore, most often definitions of critical consciousness describe some combination of critical social analysis, collective social identity, political self-efficacy, and actions aimed at advancing social justice (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). A strong link worth mentioning to clarify the concept refers to the relationship between critical consciousness and critical thinking. Based on contrasts and complementarity, critical consciousness, unlike critical thinking, assumes that the thinking individual does not act in isolation but, rather, in relationship to others and the world. The development of critical consciousness involves a reflective awareness of the differences in power and privilege, the inequities embedded in social relationships, and a reorientation of perspective towards a commitment to social justice (Kumagai, 2009). Therefore, it is not limited to formal and informal logic skills, conceptual analysis, and epistemology. Critical consciousness is the socio-political version of critical thinking and allows critical thinking to emerge (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998). Essentially, critical consciousness is critical thinking applied in the realm of today's society. Nonetheless, it can be seen as a theory of critical thinking even if is not properly perceived by the critical thinking theorists. Critical thinking perceives critical consciousness as an entirely different matter, though equally valuable. The critical consciousness suggests that the two cannot be separated because they represent two standards of epistemic suitability (valid argument, justifying evidence, or conceptual clarity). There are particular ways in which these standards are invoked and interpreted in certain situations. Critical consciousness involves questioning the motivation behind those who propose

certain points of view, their group interests, their effects on society, and so on, whereas critical thinking investigates the logic, clarity, or consistency of assumptions. This kind of criticism is undoubtedly adequate and useful. Moreover, a separation between the two blocks influences various epistemic aspects, such as how research questions are developed, research methods used, and the qualifications of researchers who lead such research (Burbules & Beck, 1999).

#### *Developmental stages of critical consciousness*

Freire (2005) described the development of critical consciousness in four stages: semi-intransitive magical, naive transitive, critical consciousness, and political consciousness. The first level, magical consciousness, represents a specific level of consciousness during which people feel unable to influence their personal or socio-economic status. The second level is naive transitive consciousness. At this level, a separation appears between the self and the outside world. Life is no longer seen as something that simply happens without one's intervention; it is believed that there are some things we can influence through direct action and that external help is needed to influence others. The difference between the first two levels of consciousness lies in the fact that during the latter, a deeper understanding of the current situation is experienced. The third level of this process is critical consciousness. At this level, the separation between self and others makes the person feel empowered. There is a wider understanding of one's capacities and, for this reason, other people are seen as less influential. At this stage, inquiry meets praxis, which can lead to social change. Political consciousness is the last stage described by Freire. At this level, individuals discover that their perception of reality is a common reality. By creating unity and taking collective action, individuals try to influence politics and end the mechanisms of oppression.

#### *Functions of critical consciousness*

Critical consciousness was formulated to provide support to marginalised individuals in overcoming structural constraints on human agency (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). From a societal perspective, it may play a crucial role in addressing social inequities and advancing community progress. When the societal inequities become salient and the motivation followed by actions to

change such inequities increase, critical consciousness impacts various domains of one's life. By analysing the results of various studies, major impact areas have been identified such as mental health (Zimmerman et al., 1999), occupational and career outcomes (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer, 2009; O'Connor, 1997; Ramos-Zayas, 2003) and civic engagement (Diemer & Li, 2011; Spencer, 2011; Rubin, 2007). In young people, high levels of critical consciousness lead to clear vocational goals and effective career planning (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer, 2009). Relating with civic development focused on social justice, critical consciousness may improve social activism (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Moreover, Diemer and Li (2011) suggested that socio-political efficacy and critical action predict civic engagement behaviour such as voting. Critical consciousness may be important for the civic development of both ethnic minority youth (Spencer, 2011; Rubin, 2007) and more advantaged youth. Therefore, critical consciousness might replace some feelings of isolation experienced by marginalised adolescents with a sense of agency and engagement in the collective struggle.

## **Method**

### *Objective*

Considering the growing number of researches produced over the years, the low visibility of the concept, and the benefits provided by the development of critical consciousness, it may be valuable for the scientific community to have access to a comprehensive systematic review regarding the role of critical consciousness. Therefore, teachers and education specialists should implement various educational practices that contribute to the development of critical consciousness. A recent review identified the key elements of critical consciousness, advancing practice, and aligning theory with practice (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). However, the present review evaluates the role of critical consciousness development in young people as presented by the results of empirical studies.

### *Publication search strategy*

This review followed the Preferred Reporting Items of Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2015). The first

step was to search in various scientific databases such as PsycINFO, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Springer, Taylor & Francis, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and EBSCO to identify the targeted publications. We searched by using English keywords like critical consciousness role, critical consciousness development, or critical consciousness use. Searching terms were combined with age marks for youth and adolescents. Only empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals have been considered for the current review. Citations of the listed articles were also searched for any potential missed studies in the initial database search. The present review is limited to journal articles to determine if and how critical consciousness reflects in empirical studies. Peer-reviewed empirical articles are usually considered the most highly regarded scientific productions, which increases the relevance to investigate how research articles explicitly refer to critical consciousness role in the development of the individual.

#### *Eligibility criteria*

For this review, empirical studies published in scientific peer-reviewed journals (in English) are examined. Therefore, the empirical studies that investigated the use or the role of critical consciousness in youth and adolescents were selected. This research focuses on Freire's approach to critical consciousness. Studies that used a different conceptualization of the concept, or did not evaluate critical consciousness, were excluded. The main focus of the current review was on the role of critical consciousness in individuals lives. Data collection methods included questionnaires, scales or surveys.

#### *Data extraction and quality assessment*

Data were extracted independently by the two authors using a specifically designed data extraction form. For each study, details of the procedure, instruments, sample, main outcome measures and main results were extracted. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion between the reviewers and, if needed, by seeking the opinion of a third person. However, there was no disagreement between the two reviewers during the data extraction (*see* Figure 1).

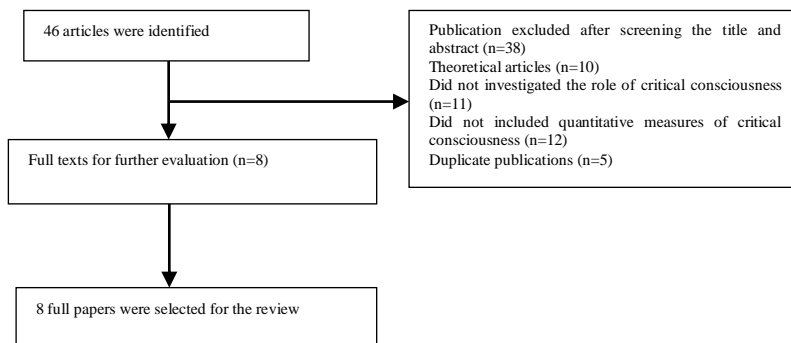


Figure 1. Flowchart showing the retrieval of studies

## Results

A total of 8 studies, summing 5,273 participants, were included in this review. Of these eight investigations, data collection methods included scales, surveys, and questionnaires. Four studies investigated each element of critical consciousness individually (critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action). Only one study used an integrated instrument for critical consciousness. Two studies investigated how critical consciousness could be promoted and its impact, and six studies assessed only how critical consciousness influences the social aspects of life. The main characteristics of these studies are summarised in Table 1. The majority of studies included in the review are associative, with only one experiment

Table 1. Summary of the 8 studies of critical consciousness

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Data collection methods	Results
Gutierrez, (1995)	Between-group design/Experiment	73 undergraduate students	Focus-groups aroused participant's feelings of ethnic identification, and ethnic consciousness	Group consciousness and ethnic consciousness surveys. Cognitive orientations to empowerment, problem construal, and change strategy measures.	Group discussion and problem-solving processes can contribute to the development of critical consciousness.

Table 1. Summary of the 8 studies of critical consciousness - *continued*

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Data collection methods	Results
Diemer et al., (2006)	Within-subjects design	98 high-school students	-	Socio-political Control Scale, Social Dominance Orientation Measure, Perceived support for challenging racism, sexism, and social injustice	For challenging racism, sexism, and social injustice from key social actors in the lives of urban adolescents are associated with the reflection component of critical consciousness, but was not associated with the action.
Diemer et al., 2006	Within-subjects design	220 high-school students	-	Social Dominance Orientation, Socio-political Control Scale, Career Commitment Measure, Vocational Identity measure.	Participants with greater levels of critical consciousness had greater clarity regarding their vocational identity, were more committed to their future careers, and viewed work as a larger part of their future.
Diemer & Li, 2011	Within-subjects design	665 subjects	-	National Survey - The Civic and Political Health Survey investigating young people's attitudes about government and socio-political issues, as well as their civic and political participation.	Parental and peer socio-political support predicts socio-political control and social action, which in turn predicts voting behaviour.



Table 1. Summary of the 8 studies of critical consciousness - *continued*

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Data collection methods	Results
Godfrey & Grayman, 2014	Within-subjects design	2774 high-school students	-	Critical Reflection - Perceptions of Equal Opportunity in Education, Critical Reflection - Perceptions of Government Responsiveness, Socio-political Efficacy - School Efficacy, Socio-political Efficacy - Political Efficacy, Critical Action - Participation in Student Government, Critical Action - Participation in the Community	Open classroom climate was predictive for socio-political efficacy in both the educational and political domains and associated to critical action in the community area.
Thomas et al., 2014	Within-subjects design	206 university students	-	Critical Consciousness Inventory, Social dominance orientation, Stigma consciousness	Individuals with higher beliefs in social dominance and those who feel that their social group is stigmatized have lower levels of critical consciousness.
McWhirter & McWhirter, 2015	Within-subjects design	476 high-school students	-	Vocational Outcome Expectations-Revised Scale, Measure of adolescent critical consciousness	Critical consciousness was associated with adolescents' work role salience, career commitment, and positive vocational expectations
Diemer & Rapa, 2016	Between-groups design	761 participants	-	Civic Education Survey	Analyses revealed complex patterns of associations between critical action: protest, political efficacy, and conventional political action. Central values of the theory, such as perceptions of inequality associating with engagement in social action, were supported by the results.

Two studies included in the present systematic review explored not only the role of youth critical consciousness but also how this aspect can be promoted

(Gutierrez, 1995; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). Therefore, group discussion, problem-solving processes, and an open classroom climate can contribute to the development of critical consciousness. Moreover, simple interaction or discussion concerning various emergent issues will not be as influential as discussion that involves a critical appraisal of the social situation and the generation of solutions. Nonetheless, an open climate was found to be predictive of socio-political efficacy in both the educational and political fields, and critical action in the community by youth. Two studies examined the role of critical consciousness in adolescents regarding various vocational aspects such as identity, expectations, and commitment (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2015). The main results highlighted that participants with higher levels of critical consciousness had increased clarity regarding their vocational identity and were more committed to their future careers, perceiving their career as a larger part of their future lives. These results suggest that adolescents may best engage the career development process by maintaining a critical awareness of socio-political inequity and situating their agency within this critical framework of the opportunity structure.

Four studies focused on the role of critical consciousness in identifying social injustice and promoting social action (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer & Li, 2011; Thomas et al., 2014; Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016). These findings support the theoretical model and suggest that challenging racism, sexism and social injustice among the key social participants in the lives of adolescents is associated with critical reflection (Diemer & Blustein, 2006). Also, complex patterns of associations emerge between critical action, e.g. protest, political efficacy, and conventional political action. Central values of critical consciousness theory, such as perceptions of inequality, are associated with engagement in social action (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016). Furthermore, parental and peer socio-political support predicts socio-political control and social action, which in turn predicts voting behaviour. This clarifies how micro-level actors foster critical consciousness and how the perceived capacity to produce social change and social action participation may redress voting disparities (Diemer & Li, 2011). These results suggest that critical consciousness may serve as a buffer to the negative effects of oppression.

## Discussions

The main goal of the current review was to bring forward the concept of critical consciousness by emphasising its functions in the life of the individual. Developing critical consciousness is an emancipatory pedagogical process meant to provide aid in developing people's skills to identify social inequities. Such skills could lead in overcoming social boundaries and effectively achieving different goals. The central educational objective is to trigger individual creativity in each person and a constant, critical reflexive capacity (Macedo, 2014). As previously mentioned, critical consciousness represents the capacity to critically reflect and act upon one's social and political reality. Hopper (1999) succinctly described this critical reflection as learning to see how history works and also how specific ways of thinking and feeling serve to perpetuate existing structures of inequality. Even though critical consciousness can be developed at any age, its early development is particularly useful for youth.

The development of critical consciousness in young people is also crucial from a societal perspective. Its main role is to challenge unjust systems and marginalisation and to advance the positive development of communities. In addition to contributions made to community life, critical consciousness strongly contributes to positive career outcomes as well as civic development (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Diemer & Blustein, 2006). Mainly formulated to help marginalised people overcome social constraints on human agency it serves as an 'antidote' to structural oppression (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). Precisely due to these desired outcomes, it is important to identify and integrate the educational practices that contribute to the development of critical consciousness. Education for consciousness is mainly based on the dialogical method and involves groups of individuals reflecting upon various aspects of their reality, analysing the root causes of their immediate reality, examining the implications and consequences of these issues, and, finally, developing strategies to solve the problems collectively identified (Minkler & Cox, 1980).

Critical learning can be facilitated through a dialogical process, guided by the purpose to encourage learner's epistemological curiosity. Furthermore, it aims to reveal truth through interactions with others, and to promote understanding, this type of interaction is preferred to a non-dialogical one that reproduces power, denies dialogue, and distorts communication (Freire, 1970). Next to this, an open classroom climate can facilitate the development of critical

consciousness together with discussion that involves a critical appraisal of the social situation and the production of solutions. It must be considered that various aspects of the school context play a significant role in influencing youths' perceptions over their capacity for action (Diemer, 2011). While initial formulations of the theory and research have identified open dialogue among peers, family, and community members as being the key components for fostering critical consciousness among youth (Diemer et al., 2006; Diemer & Li, 2011; Freire, 1970), studies have rarely examined whether open dialogue experienced in the classroom is also beneficial for critical consciousness development. To conclude, the use of critical consciousness resides in the fact that it is a way of knowing that involves a critical analysis of reality. Analysing as a participant and not as an observer involves a sense of connectedness with reality. Moreover, it is a process of collective dialogue, of construction in the course of dynamic social interaction. Most individuals who exhibit some level of critical consciousness gave evidence of an intellectual, civic, and moral education that produced a potentially liberating critical consciousness.

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