

Transformative Action: A Theoretical Framework for Breaking New Ground

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Abstract

Developed by Paulo Freire, critical consciousness (CrC) is a philosophical, theoretical, and practice-based framework encompassing an individual's understanding of and action against the structural roots of inequity and violence. This article explores divergent CrC scholarship regarding CrC theory and practice; provides an in-depth review of inconsistencies within the CrC "action" domain; and, in an effort to resolve discrepancies within the existing CrC literature, presents a new construct—transformative action (TA)—and details the process of TA development. Comprising three hierarchical levels of action (critical, avoidant, and destructive) for each level of the socio-ecosystem, TA serves as a model for community-based practitioners, such as those working in the fields of social work and public affairs. The authors argue that transformation is necessary to deconstruct the social institutions in the United States that maintain and perpetuate systemic inequity, creating dehumanizing consequences. Through critical TA, community workers can make visible hidden socio-structural factors, such as institutionalized racism and White privilege, countering the historic trend of community workers acting as tools of social control—that is, socializing individuals to adapt to marginalized roles and accept inferior treatment; maintaining and enforcing the status quo; and facilitating conformity with inequitable societal norms and practices. The authors also discuss the implications of community-based TA practice.

Keywords: transformative action, critical consciousness, critical social work, theory, anti-racism, White supremacy, White privilege, social dominance, anti-oppression, education

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 2000, p. 34)

As the epigraph suggests, the education system has been simultaneously lauded as a tool of liberation and critiqued as a means for maintaining the inequitable status quo. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2000) developed the concept of critical consciousness (CrC) to advance an educational pedagogy for liberating the masses from systemic inequity, maintained and perpetuated by the processes, practices, and outcomes of interdependent systems and institutions. Socio-historical and structural forces that divide people into groups along superficial lines—such as the social constructs of race, gender, and class status—reflect social, economic, and political differentials resulting from disparate treatment of group members based solely on their group membership rather than actual individual attributes, characteristics, merit, or abilities (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). The disparities between such socially constructed groups (e.g., male-identified/everyone else, Whites/everyone else) across institutions reflect how U.S. social systems are interconnected, such that occupying a substandard position in one system likely guarantees an equivalent marginalized position in other systems.

From a CrC perspective, individual and social dysfunction are direct consequences of systemic inequity—that is, structural and intrapersonal oppression and privilege (Mullaly, 2002). Here, the term *inequity* encompasses such phenomena as racism, sexism, and heterosexism, which include components of both majority group privilege and marginalized group oppression. Oppression is manifested in limited access to opportunities and resources (Jemal, 2016), while privilege provides unfettered access to and assistance from opportunities and resources (Berman & Paradies, 2010; Buhin & Vera, 2009; Freire, 2000; Jemal, 2016). Systemic inequity is apparent in social norms and cultural mores; it involves structural processes—evident in both casual social practices and formal legal systems—that systematically oppress or disadvantage some individuals and groups while benefiting and privileging others. The seeds of inequity were planted in this country’s terrain by its original colonizers. As a result, marginalized populations contend not only with the current day-to-day discrimination and inequity, but also with the cumulative impact of inequity stemming from the past.

In the United States, the legal metaphor “fruit of the poisonous tree” is used to describe evidence obtained illegally by the government: If the source of the evidence (the “tree”) is tainted, then anything that comes from that source (the

“fruit) is also tainted (Dressler, 2002). When applied to U.S. history, this metaphor offers insight into why social inequities exist today. Foundational laws, institutions, and systems in the United States are grounded in White supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism; thus, all products grown from the country’s historical foundations are infected by these oppressive ideologies. The nation inherited the structural inequity of the past, and, left unaddressed, this history manifests (Speri, 2017) within the daily operations, culture, and people of U.S. society. The inequitable status quo, molded by racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism, comprises a shared, socially constructed, collective reality. With systemic inequity deeply ingrained in social reality, “it can be difficult to discern, like the water we swim in or the air we breathe” (Speight, 2007, p. 126). One way to identify the presence and impact of oppression or privilege is with evidence of disproportionality or disparity, characterized by overrepresentation and/or underrepresentation (Bradley & Engen, 2016). Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of individuals with specific characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language background, gender, etc.) is higher in some domain (e.g., prison) than in the general population, while underrepresentation is the opposite (National Education Association, 2008). Disproportionality exists in every sociopolitical establishment in the United States (e.g., education, criminal justice, health, housing, child welfare, employment, government), demonstrating the pervasiveness of injustice (Alexander, 2010; Bangs & Davis, 2015).

With systems rooted in the dominant oppressive ideologies of White supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism, gradual reform efforts tend to be ineffective. Many scholars have criticized civil rights legislation for merely pacifying the marginalized masses with slow and incremental reforms that, in actuality, preclude true social change (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hill, 2016; Massey & Denton, 2003; West, 2001). Critical awareness and action may be the more radical means necessary to transform, rather than reform, the systems and institutions that maintain and perpetuate dehumanizing systemic inequity. Critical consciousness is a framework through which all sources and circumstances of inequity can be critically viewed, analyzed, and dismantled. Whereas cultural competency considers cultural contexts and diversity (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2003), CrC focuses on levels of consciousness and action that advance or combat oppression and privilege. As such, transformative action (TA)—defined as levels of action taken to address the causative, inequitable elements and factors perpetuating an identified problem in order to develop and implement solutions at one or more levels of the socio-ecosystem—and cultural competency are different but complementary. Cultural competency addresses issues of diversity, working against ethnocentrism and toward ethnorelativism, while TA goes beyond diversity to uncover issues of power as they relate to differences at multiple systemic levels. Applying culturally competent pedagogy to

address inequity is one aspect of CrC-informed practice. This article offers a discussion of community-based practitioners and their role in social transformation; explores divergent CrC scholarship related to CrC theory and practice; provides an in-depth review of inconsistencies within the CrC “action” domain; and, to help resolve discrepancies in existing CrC literature, explores the construct of TA and the process of its development. Given that TA is a new theoretical framework, we outline limitations and the need for future research.

Social Work and Community-Based Practitioners

Social workers and community-based practitioners have a professional obligation, in addition to their own personal motivations, to perform the radical, critical action addressing socio-historical and structural forces that is necessary to transform systems of inequity. Because we are social workers, this article represents a call to the field of social work to embrace an ideology and pedagogy aligned with its social justice core (NASW, 1996). Indeed, in light of its long history of social activism, social work has an ethical and professional mandate to address systemic inequity (Abramovitz, 1998) and is well positioned to play an active role in the deconstruction of White supremacy and oppression (Hadden, Tolliver, Snowden, & Brown-Manning, 2016; Jemal, 2017b; Moore et al., 2016). The field of social work is eclectic and interdisciplinary by nature, pulling together a multitude of siloed knowledge and practice to address injustice and accomplish its mission of healing social ills that plague society. At the heart of the social work profession is the commitment to preventing and eliminating domination, exploitation, and discrimination, all of which pose barriers to a positive quality of life and to freedom, unhindered by injustice. According to the NASW (2018) Code of Ethics, social workers should advocate changes in individuals, communities, and policy to meet human needs and promote social justice. Ecological, empowerment, and systems theories, as well as the person-in-environment approach, promote a holistic assessment of needs, consider contextual and macro-level factors (Finn & Jacobson, 2008), and endorse systemic interventions for addressing inequity and disparities (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

However, social work is not the only field to value and work toward social justice and cultural inclusiveness, nor is it the only one that may benefit from incorporating critical transformative action. Transformative action offers a framework for social work practice (here, “social work practice” includes all activities in which a social worker may engage, such as clinical counseling, community organizing, policy advocacy, education, and research) at micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Mullaly, 2002) and any related positions involved in community-based practice (e.g., public administrators, urban planners, and non-profit practitioners). The fields of social work and public affairs bridge individual and community practice by acknowledging that macro forces have micro consequences

and that micro practices are reflective of macro sociopolitical processes—and by opposing the structural forces that underlie problems experienced at the individual level. In other words, micro and macro practices inform each other (Austin, Anthony, Knee, & Mathias, 2016). If people, specifically community-based practitioners, are unaware of multi-level and systemic injustice and do not act to constantly resist oppressive norms—or ways of being—the result is perpetual inequity. Freire (2000) maintained that individuals—whether the oppressors or the oppressed—living in inequitable societies will only realize their full humanity through the critical analysis of injustice and critical action against inequity, that is, critical consciousness.

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is foundational to community-based practitioners' work and education for understanding and combatting systemic inequity. The lack of CrC in a community creates an environment conducive to oppression that spreads throughout and impacts systems from the individual to the macro level (Freire, 2000). The development of critical consciousness mitigates the destructive impact of oppression (Cohen, 2001; Wallin-Ruschman, 2018) and promotes social action against sources of oppression (Delia & Krasny, 2018; Thomas et al., 2014; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015; Windsor, Pinto, Benoit, Jessell, & Jemal, 2014). “The process whereby people achieve an illuminating awareness of the socioeconomic and cultural circumstances that shape their lives and their capacity to transform that reality” (Freire, 1975, p. 800) is an active, participatory process through which individuals and groups gain greater control over their identities and lives, protect human rights, and reduce social injustice (Maton, 2008).

To date, there has been significant innovative scholarship around and reformulation of CrC theory to ameliorate inequitable conditions and processes through civic engagement that challenges inequities (Baxamusa, 2008; Peterson, 2014) underlying social and health crises (e.g., racial disparities in the justice system and the HIV epidemic in communities of color) (Fawcett et al., 2010). The objective of CrC is to shift understanding of social problems away from personal failings—as endorsed by the color-blind paradigm and social dominance orientation—toward structural causes (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2017; Jemal, 2016), thereby addressing multi-systemic inequity (Freire, 2000). As a result, CrC theory has been used in research to examine a broad range of health, social, and educational disparities (Campbell & MacPhail 2002; McGirr & Sullivan, 2017; Windsor, Jemal, & Benoit, 2014) and is associated with a host of desirable individual-level outcomes among marginalized people (Chronister & McWhirter, 2006; Diemer & Li, 2011; Hatcher et al., 2010; Seider, Tamerat, Clark, & Soutter, 2017). As such, the construct of CrC has important scholarly, practice, and policy implications. However, though scholars, noting the relevance and application of

CrC to current social problems, have advanced its theory and practice, these innovative advancements have left fissures in the CrC theoretical base that need to be resolved; moreover, there must be greater consensus among the many definitions and operationalizations of CrC (Jemal, 2017a).

Conceptual Limitations of Critical Consciousness

One primary conceptual limitation of CrC is the lack of consensus among scholars around its definition (Jemal, 2017a). Most conceptualizations define critical consciousness as recognizing and challenging inequitable conditions and use a two-dimensional model of reflection and action to illustrate it. However, the literature has given inconsistent and relatively little attention to operationalizing the action domain of CrC (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015), which is often conceptualized as “an individual’s objective ability or potency to act given structural constraints” (Campbell & MacPhail 2002, p. 333). Yet, Freire (1973) also noted that “while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others” (p. 66), emphasizing the need for collective action for social transformation. There appears to be uncertainty as to whether action involves capacity to act (Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hsieh, 2006) or overt action (Chronister & McWhirter, 2006). In addition, there is disagreement in the literature regarding what constitutes activism: Debate has focused on whether action must be extra-institutional to qualify as activism; the amount of coordination needed between actors engaged in the action; and whether one’s membership in a movement is founded on explicit actions and/or supportive attitudes (Corning & Myers, 2002). Another question considers whether action extends beyond the type of act to what the action supports. This is important because action type (e.g., voting, participating in a political party, club, or organization) without considering the cause might allow oppressive, White supremacist, and/or totalitarian individuals and groups to be considered critically conscious, which is counterintuitive. Although an in-depth discussion of CrC scales is beyond the scope of this article, the action-domain conceptualization issues outlined previously manifest in the scales developed to measure CrC. Specifically, items on scales often exclude the purpose for action and only inquire about the type of participation, such as voting or political party participation (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2017; Speer & Peterson, 2000), and/or they use vague or broad terms (e.g., “human rights”) that permit respondent interpretation and incomparable outcomes (Thomas et al., 2014). For conceptual congruence, it is critical that only anti-oppressive and anti-privilege action be considered as CrC action.

Exclusion of the privileged and absence of privilege. Some scholars have limited the focus of the action domain to oppressed or marginalized populations (Baker & Brookins, 2014; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Such limited definitions exclude individuals perpetuating oppression and may inadvertently

support the proposition that oppression is a problem solely for oppressed individuals to solve. In contrast, it is crucial for CrC development to occur in members of privileged groups who have greater access to resources and power, and may operate as allies (Thomas et al., 2014). To achieve liberation, it is imperative that beneficiaries of inequitable resource distribution and access to opportunities recognize injustices and acquire the knowledge and skills needed for social change. Although marginalized populations may use action to cope with, heal from, and resist dehumanizing contexts (Hernandez, Almeida, & Del-Vecchio, 2005; Windsor, Jemal, et al., 2014), action allows privileged individuals to recognize their part in the perpetuation of disparate conditions throughout generations and their role in implementing solutions: Only the inheritors can reject their inheritance. Liberation requires solidarity in which the oppressor takes a radical posture of empathy, “entering into the situation of those with whom one is solidary” (Freire, 2000, p. 49). Equally problematic as the exclusion of privileged social identities is the failure of the action domain to incorporate the concept of privilege. The majority of definitions limit CrC to addressing oppression (Garcia, Kosutic, McDowell, & Anderson, 2009); however, systemic inequity requires dividing people into binary groups—“us” versus “them”—and applying differential treatment based on group membership. This differential treatment greatly determines access to opportunities and resources (Speri, 2017). Thus, privilege and oppression are mutually reinforcing, operating in a cyclical process and each providing sustenance to the other. As such, an antidote to oppression must include critical transformative action that addresses inequity inclusive of oppression and the presence of privilege (Jemal, 2018).

Transformative Action as a Response to Conceptual Limitations of CrC

In response to the conceptual limitations of CrC’s action domain, this article introduces the new construct of transformative action (defined previously). To inform the first author’s thinking and to conceptualization TA, the first author followed constructivist grounded theory (CGT) as a method of inquiry and analysis (Charmaz, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), leveraging three main resources: (1) the first author’s practice and research experience as co-developer and facilitator of a CrC-based health intervention; (2) interviews with experts in the field of CrC at the VIII International Meeting of the Paulo Freire Forum; and, (3) existing CrC literature. Through CGT, a hybrid analysis strategy allows knowledge to be generated from respondent data and the researcher’s preexisting knowledge. Thus, a data-driven inductive approach and a deductive a priori template of codes derived from preexisting research created a grounding orientation to the social phenomenon, while allowing themes to emerge directly from the data to expand upon previous understanding (Charmaz, 2005). Data collected from interviews,

practice, and research provided a method for developing the initial framework presented.

Due to space limitations, this article cannot offer a rigorous outlay of how these components inspired the formulation of the initial TA framework (though subsequent research will refine and test the model). The interviews that explored conceptualizations of CrC helped to define the construct and identify the levels (Goodman et al., 1998). As co-developer of and facilitator for *Community Wise*, a behavioral-health intervention grounded in CrC theory, the first author observed participants engaged in social action projects (Windsor, Jemal, et al., 2014; Windsor, Jessell, Lassiter, & Benoit, 2015). The first author co-chaired a taskforce to develop the social action component of *Community Wise* and, through informal observation of two *Community Wise* cohorts, learned the following: Community organizing skills are needed to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes that address historical contexts and structural barriers impacting individual behaviors; critical action is a continuous process that fluctuates over time and is influenced by experience, capacity, and chances of success; and engaging in critical action alone can be alienating, although motivation and inspiration for critical action comes from the act of doing.

Like the action domain of CrC, transformative action is one dimension of a larger conceptual framework known as transformative potential (TP)—a philosophical, theoretical and practice-based framework informed by and developed in response to the theoretical limitations of Freire's (2000) CrC pedagogy. Transformative potential is defined as levels of consciousness and action that produce the potential to transform contextual factors and relationships perpetuating inequitable conditions and that are necessary for change at one or more socio-ecosystemic level (Jemal, 2017a). To end systemic inequity, community workers internalize two roles--first, as the developer of one's own transformative potential, and second, as the developer of the transformative potential in others. Although future research is needed to test the model, the theory suggests that a person with a high level of transformative potential critically reflects on the conditions that shape their life and actively works with their self and/or others to change problematic conditions (Jemal, 2016). The process of transformation requires the simultaneous and reciprocal processes of objectification and action (Freire, 2000). One cannot truly perceive the depth of a problem without being involved in some form of action that confronts it (Corcoran, Pettinicchio, & Young, 2015; Freire, 2000). Thus, merely reflecting on realities without intervention will not lead to transformation. With these ideas in mind, and similar to how many scholars have conceptualized CrC (Diemer & Blustein 2006), TP comprises two dimensions: transformative consciousness (TC) and transformative action (see Figure 1). Although TP and CrC have more in common than not, one major

difference between them is that the two dimensions of TP each consist of three levels. For TC, the hierarchical levels of consciousness are denial, blame, and critical (Jemal, 2018). For TA, the tiered levels of action are destructive, avoidant, and critical. Thus, for TP, critical consciousness and critical action are the highest levels of each dimension and produce the greatest transformative potential.

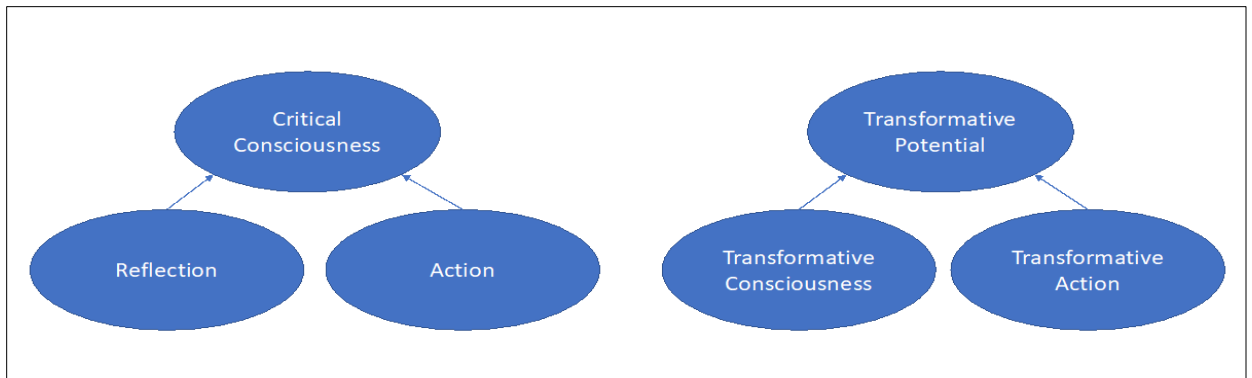


Figure 1. Conceptual models of CrC and TP. The figure illustrates the dimensions of the two models for comparison.

Levels of Transformative Action

The three levels of transformative action—destructive action, avoidant action, and critical action—are grounded in Freire’s (1973) work (see Figure 2). For “destructive action,” people take action that perpetuates inequity, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This level focuses on the action taken and the consequences of the action rather than the person’s state of mind. For “avoidant action,” people do not attempt to address inequity; they ignore it. Although they are not engaging directly in activity to perpetuate inequity, their avoidance constitutes active collusion in maintaining the oppressive status quo. As James Baldwin (1962) stated, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” The “critical action” level is the highest level of TA, in which individuals respond deliberately and purposely to inequity underlying individual and/or social problems. Many scholars define critical action as the overt engagement in individual or collective action to produce sociopolitical change in the unjust aspects (e.g., institutional policies and practices) of society that cause unhealthy conditions (Diemer et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2011).

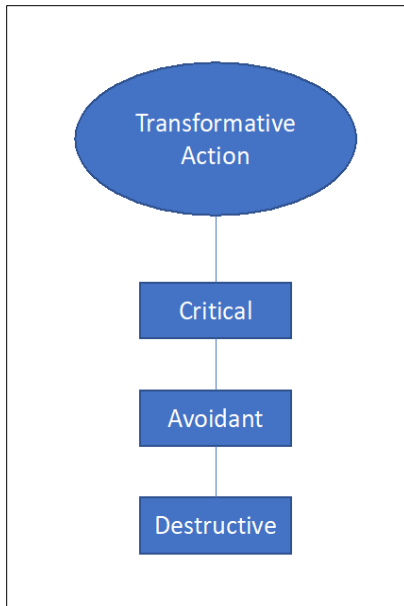


Figure 2. Conceptual model of TA. The figure illustrates the three hierarchical levels of TA.

The critical action level is grounded in the steps for nonviolent action that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proposed in his 1963 *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*: data collection, negotiation/communication, self-purification, and direct action. Critical action includes: collecting data about the underlying inequity; breaking the silence surrounding the inequity that facilitates collusion, complicity, and compliance with inequity; reflecting on ways in which one participates in the perpetuation of inequity; and action that directly addresses the inequity. Consider the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of Black people in the U.S. justice system as an example (Alexander, 2010). People with critical TA would seek policing and sentencing reform. People with avoidant TA would not attempt to address systemic racial bias, ignoring it and considering their response neutral. Those with destructive TA would act to perpetuate the disproportionality (e.g., police officers engaged in racial profiling, support of stop-and-frisk policies).

Social-ecological model. Transformative action is informed by a modified version of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) social-ecological systems theory, a person-in-environment perspective representing how individuals create their contextual environments and how multiple systemic levels influence individuals' behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Stokols, 1992). Bronfenbrenner's (1994) social-ecological model postulates that there are dynamic interrelations among various personal and environmental factors, such that the interior nature of human beings affects levels

of environment and, in turn, levels of environment affect human development and behavior. As a nested arrangement of structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), the social-ecological model is bi-directional, and the interactions between each system level are synergistic, such that an interaction may produce an effect that otherwise would not have occurred.

Transformative action adapts Bronfenbrenner's (1977) individual level by dividing it into two: intrapersonal and interpersonal. This is intended to capture the distinct factors that occur within an individual (intrapersonal), such as cognitions, attitudes, knowledge, and cultural beliefs, and those related to an individual's interactions with others that influence their life, problems, or environment (interpersonal). Extracting the intrapersonal level is a significant modification because oppression embodies structural marginalization that infiltrates internal psychological states of being (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). For the oppressed, oppression at the intrapersonal level is a violent socialization process into inferiority; for the socially privileged, it is a mindset of superiority or social dominance (Berman & Paradies, 2010; Feagin & O'Brien, 2003; Jemal, Young, & Bussey, 2018). The microsystem (micro) level pertains to the interactions between the individual and family, friends, classmates, neighbors, and others with whom the individual has direct interactions. The mesosystem (meso) involves the relationships between and among the microsystems in a person's life—for example, an interaction between family and school due to child neglect impacting school performance. Within the exosystem (exo), the individual plays no active role in the construction of experiences; rather, the interactions occur between institutions or at the institutional level, directly or indirectly affecting the individual. The macrosystem (macro) is composed of the culture, norms, values, laws, attitudes, and ideologies of the society in which a person lives. The chronosystem (chrono) includes the patterning and cumulative effects of events and transitions manifesting over time or throughout the life course, as well as socio-historical circumstances that create an individual's context. A person's level of TA is informed by their reflection on the interconnectedness of all levels of the socio-ecosystem and of themselves as an active participant. It is important and necessary for TA to be informed by the socio-ecological model because forms of inequity operate at each socio-ecological level, from individual discrimination to institutional processes that create disparities, to cultural values (Shin, Ezeofor, Smith, Welch, & Goodrich, 2016) that allow unjustified fear of a person, stemming from racism, to excuse murder. Moreover, inequitable processes, practices, and outcomes at one level are mutually reinforcing of those processes, practices, and outcomes at the other levels (Shin et al., 2016).

The socio-ecological model helps to identify contextual causes, factors, and relationships between self, others, and community that may be necessary for change

at one or more levels. In other words, the social-ecological model is relevant to TA because action can be multi-leveled. Critical transformative action at each level is necessary to create equitable, socio-ecosystemic change. The critical analysis of each level opens the availability of options for action and change beyond the individual level. Additionally, the incorporation of the model facilitates the identification of contextual relationships and factors that shape an individual's change-making ability or potential, whether the individual produces change or not. For example, a multi-level assessment may reveal skills and competencies at the individual level but indicate a lack of community resources, which could limit individual strengths. Thus, TA connects individual and community causes, action, and consequences (Corning & Myers, 2002). When addressing substance misuse frequency, for instance, it is crucial to address "substance misuse as a complex phenomenon interrelated with poverty, violence, and low social capital" (Windsor, Pinto, et al., 2014, p. 403). Treatment of individuals and families in isolation from their sociopolitical contexts ignores the influence of inequitable forces on their daily experiences (Windsor, Benoit, & Dunlap, 2010). The socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) posits that programs will be most successful if changes are promoted at multiple levels, from person-oriented interventions to public policy (Stokols, 1992). The development of TA "supposes that persons change in the process of changing their relations with their environment and with other people" (Chronister, Wettersten, & Brown, 2004, p. 902). A key element of the critical action is that critical action taken on one level may influence the other levels and vice versa (Green, 2009).

Levels of Transformative Action (Intrapersonal)		
Destructive	Avoidant	Critical
Aggressive or direct action taken to perpetuate inequity.	Passive action or inaction that allows the perpetuation of inequity.	Assertive action that addresses inequity.
Actions that directly contribute to systemic inequity in one's life and includes the perpetuation of intrapersonal oppression and/or privilege in various life domains.	The lack of agency and problem-solving methods and communication that do not reduce or actively contribute to, but indirectly reinforce, systemic inequity and/or marginalizing processes within one's own life.	Direct action (e.g., behaviors, problem-solving methods, communication) that directly combats systemic inequity within one's own life.

Table 1. Example of Systems Theory Applied to Intrapersonal Level of Transformative Action

Although there are many similarities between CrC's action domain and TA, there are several key distinctions between the constructs, including: (1) TA is not subsumed under the latent variable of CrC; (2) as a separate and distinct construct from CrC, TA incorporates three levels of action, with critical action serving as the highest level of TA; (3) TA incorporates Bronfenbrenner's (1994) social ecological systems theory; and (4) the TA framework explicitly incorporates both sides of systemic inequity (i.e., privilege and oppression) and includes privileged identities. The following section describes the process stages of TA development, moving from non-critical to critical action.

Process from non-critical to critical action. Transformative action development encompasses transformation on two levels: first, the action potential needed to transform oppressive social realities into equitable and just conditions; and second, one's potential to undergo a specific teleological transformation through the levels of TA, from uncritical to critical levels of action, toward a place where one can transform inequitable situations and contexts. Action is a tool for identity development (Windsor, Jemal, et al., 2014; Windsor, Pinto, et al., 2014).

Civic engagement and sociopolitical action shape how one perceives self, others, and social injustices. As people challenge inequitable conditions within local sociopolitical contexts, new understandings of themselves, other group members, and contexts arise (Garcia et al., 2009). A person’s identity, then, becomes that of an active and engaged citizen, defined as “someone who has a sense of civic duty, feeling of social connection to their community, confidence in their abilities to effect change ... [and] someone who engages in civic behavior” (Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010, p. 737). In turn, action transforms person and environment simultaneously.

Although scholars have identified the development processes for constructs like CrC, such as sociopolitical development (Watts et al., 1999), or for theorized components of CrC, such as critical reflection (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006), research has not identified stages specific to critical action development. The process of TA, or moving from destructive or avoidant levels of action to critical action, includes progressing through several hypothesized stages (see Table 2) informed by the trans-theoretical model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983):

- Stage 1: Pre-consider action. The person has no intention to change their behavior or to take action to address inequity within the next six months.
- Stage 2: Consider action. The person is seriously considering changing their behavior and/or taking action to address systemic inequity within the next six months.
- Stage 3: Prepare action. The individual intends to change their behavior or take direct action to address inequity within the next month and may have been unsuccessful in past attempts to address inequity or make behavioral changes within the previous year.
- Stage 4: Critical action. The individual acts right now and takes direct action to address systemic inequity.

The process of moving toward critical action is not linear in that individuals may advance, skip, or regress to different stages.

Action Stage	Description
Pre-Consider Action	“I have no intention to address systemic inequity within the next 6 months.”

Consider Action	“I am seriously considering addressing systemic inequity within the next 6 months.”
Prepare Action	“I intend to address systemic inequity in the next month, and I may have taken action unsuccessfully in the past year or have made some behavioral change.”
Critical Action	“I am addressing systemic inequity and/or have altered my behavior in a way that makes it less likely that I will perpetuate inequity.”

Table 2. Process of Moving from Non-Critical Action Stages to Critical Action Stage

Transformative Action and Education

The TA framework is important for student and faculty development. Faculty are responsible for shaping future practitioners, and students are responsible for carrying the mantle of their respective fields. Culturally competent pedagogy informed by transformative action inspires individuals to become self-directed learners and active citizens (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). As such, curriculum and classroom activities should be: (1) grounded in the lives of students, providing opportunity to link their lives with broader society; (2) collaborative, building a community that supports consciousness-raising and collective action; (3) critical, moving past assumptions and learning to pose critical questions about society, popular culture, government actions, and global/local policies; and (4) compassionately engaged, understanding the interconnectedness of all people and actions, and developing the perspective of self as an active participant in society. Curriculum fostering this approach prepares students to understand how cultural realities independently and interactively affect the outcomes of political processes and public institutions, which minimizes debilitating and caustic political tensions while elevating healthy civic interaction and discourse. Most importantly, TA and culturally competent pedagogy facilitate the understanding that avoidant action is complacency toward the inequitable status quo. Because most people are unaware of the interrelationships among systems—that is, how micro practices are reflective of macro sociopolitical processes and vice versa—and/or lack the capacity to actively combat injustice, many may unwittingly perpetuate injustice. Thus, the fight for justice is one that encompasses perception and action—the perception that to take care of oneself it is necessary to take care of others (i.e. shared fate), and action toward systemic change, addressing the power imbalances and lack of access to resources at multiple levels and across multiple systems.

Pedagogical recommendations. Teaching philosophies and methods rooted in the TA framework seek to: challenge faculty and students to think critically; honor all contributions to the classroom; remain connected to values of social justice and cultural competency; respect issues of diversity and inclusion in the classroom; and prioritize process over outcome. Ideally, teaching creates environments conducive to transformative experiences. Not only will students begin to understand how their lives and biographies are connected to social structures, power, and history, but they will also begin to understand how they can be creators of knowledge. The classroom is an ideal place for educators to put theory into practice, challenging students to understand what it means to think from a social-ecological perspective about a social problem. Educators might include modules or practice activities of applied experience, developing and conducting action (e.g., using professional scenarios they will likely encounter in the field), identify why the action is destructive, avoidant, or critical, and for whom, because context matters. Instead of using the banking method of education—in which educators deposit knowledge into students who are considered empty vessels (Freire, 2000)—critical dialogue and Socratic questions facilitate students’ evaluations of their own action and the actions of their peers. Asking students to analyze their everyday experiences through a critical framework inspires them to think differently about how people interact in the world.

Transformative action practice challenges students to think critically about social problems, that is, learning to critically examine so-called “natural” states of being through a sociocultural and political lens. The question becomes, How are micro practices reflective of macro sociopolitical processes? To address this question, group exercises should challenge students to imagine how and why various actors respond to an individual or social issue, facilitating the students’ grasp of social, cultural, political, and economic factors that influence human experience. Group participation combines tools for consciousness-raising and critical TA development such as: dialogue that promotes reflective questioning about the connections between personal and societal issues; role plays and other participatory activities; discussions grounded within the daily, shared realities of those involved in the consciousness-raising process; co-constructing new and empowered understandings and identities; and identifying potential solutions to local problems (Hatcher et al., 2010). Small groups foster a constructive process in which participants are allowed the time and given the encouragement to create a physically and psychologically respectful space (Ginwright & James, 2002) that permits exploration of connections between personal and social problems. Further, educators may stage periodic “action report back” sessions in which students share their TA progress, challenges, and concerns with each other, while offering strategies and suggestions for thinking through these challenges. These exercises

are effective in educating students about the relevance of critical thinking and acting beyond the classroom.

Another technique is to prioritize student-centered teaching methods in which students take on small-group work throughout the semester using interactive media and online discussion boards. Incorporating group activities and instructional technology in the classroom provides an infrastructure for supporting peer learning and collaborative knowledge production. Grounding the curriculum in students' lives and needs creates an explicit connection between their experiences and society at large. Educators may schedule initial and ongoing critical conversations using reflective questions, maps of social capital, and questionnaires for exploring social identities and systems of privilege and oppression. Reflective questions that direct attention to power dynamics within systemic inequity—such as, "Where does knowledge of dysfunctional families come from, and how do class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability inform the dynamics of this system?"—allowing exploration of how "knowledge is created and maintained by larger sociopolitical forces" (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 32).

Community-based education. For learning beyond the classroom, the opportunity for community-based pedagogy represents an additional non-hierarchical approach that builds on the needs and expertise of a given community. Community-based education includes: self-accountability for reflecting on power dynamics as they relate to the professional role and aspects of personal identity; continuously examining how personal biases, assumptions, and normative values influence perceptions of differences between individuals; owning one's contributions to social injustice; and developing partnerships to foster social justice (Garcia et al., 2009; Smith & Jemal, 2015). Benefits of this approach include: leveraging existing knowledge and educational resources available within the community setting; drawing deeper connections between students' lived experience in their surrounding environment and their professional development; enhancing engagement with traditionally marginalized students, such as first-generation college students, students of color, and students from lower income communities; and encouraging opportunities for students to navigate effecting change in their local social systems (e.g., community organizing efforts, political advocacy) (Annette, 2009; Conley & Hamlin, 2009). This approach may also include engaging students in community-based participatory research, which challenges traditional definitions of how and by whom knowledge is produced (Strand, 2000). Such opportunities and tools are needed to break the silence surrounding injustice and to progress toward critical TA (Freire, 2000). Educators dedicated to inspiring students to use social theory in creative ways to address social injustice issues, while increasing the diversity of voices and perspectives heard in the classroom and beyond, are key for critical TA development.

Pedagogical supports and barriers. The transformative action model fosters environments that promote the values of democracy, justice, and equity in the classroom. It encompasses a learning style that is non-hierarchical and presumes that: everyone has knowledge; everyone is an expert in their own experience; individuals are more alike than different; and people can unite around their similarities and learn from their differences. These tenets reframe cultural variety in the classroom as an opportunity for enhanced learning rather than a barrier to knowledge production. The success of this approach, however, requires the cultivation of brave and respectful spaces rather than safe spaces. A safe space is a privileged space because someone's safety may exist at the expense of another person's or group's safety. Feelings of discomfort have been falsely equated with lack of safety, which impedes the educational process since, in true form, education is intended to make people uncomfortable. Discomfort is often a sign that strongly held beliefs are being challenged and critiqued, indicating the breaking of a shell protecting one's understanding and the potential for developing different perspectives.

Counter to the idea that everyone is an expert in their own experience is the assertion that members of dominant groups have privileged knowledge about the lived experiences of members of marginalized groups. Illogically, this privileged knowledge informs wide-reaching social policies and interventions prioritized over the knowledge possessed by those most impacted by the interventions or policies. Transformative action and culturally competent pedagogy challenge this false logic, acknowledging instead that an individual's perceptions do not provide a full picture and that conflicting perceptions can be simultaneously right and wrong. This builds on the parable of the blind men and the elephant: One person's experiences may locate them at the elephant's tail, whereas another person's experiences will position them at the ear; both perspectives are fragmented. Brave spaces require those who occupy them to acknowledge the gaps in awareness from which non-critical action may derive.

There exist barriers to this framework, however. The traditional U.S. educational system trains students to accept that education requires expert professors who prepare students for testing, with the grade being the most important outcome. The belief that students do not pay tuition to learn from their peers, who are too ignorant to offer knowledge, is contraindicative of the TA model. Ultimately, schooling in the traditional framework may be a barrier to overcome rather than a transformative experience. A second barrier is the sociopolitical context that maintains the high cost of education and inhibits students from focusing primarily on learning. Often, students have part- or full-time employment, family responsibilities, with a full-time course load, and do not have the luxury to think deeply about course material or personal reflexivity. In addition, as an

extension of capitalism in higher education, educators have become tantamount to middle management, trapped between the competing demands of students (i.e., consumers) and administrators. Large classrooms crammed with students do not lend themselves to in-depth reading and small-group assignments. Further, the impact of student-teacher evaluations influences educators to conform to the banking model of education, despite their best intentions. This impedes facilitating student discomfort, which accompanies new understandings and is necessary for critical TA development.

Conclusion

This article sought to identify the conceptual limitations of CrC's action domain in the literature and, in response, to conceptualize a new construct, transformative action. Operationalized, the TA framework provides a model for identifying a person's level of action (i.e., destructive, avoidant, and critical) and the progression from non-critical to critical action. As TA is a theoretical framework in its early development, further testing is needed to measure its efficacy in relation to other CrC-driven models. Limitations include its lack of application to broad settings and groups for analysis to confirm construct validity. Currently, the evaluation of TA's overall scholarly standing would be premature due to the lack of available scales to measure the construct; however, TA-related scale development is in process that will allow for further testing. Despite these limitations, one of the many benefits of this framework is that it highlights avoidant action, challenging the idea that one's hands are "clean" if one declines participation in destructive action. Transformative action facilitates the understanding that there is no neutral stance; not being part of the solution perpetuates inequity, similar to destructive action. The TA framework also exposes privilege and the absence of the oppressor in CrC's prior conceptualization, ensuring that justice does not imply "just us." Transformative action encompasses Benjamin Franklin's notion that "justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are" (Goodreads, 2015).

Since the professional and ethical codes of social work necessitate that social workers advocate for changes across micro, mezzo, and macro levels to best meet human needs, promote social justice, and address inequity, critical consciousness, or its derivative, transformative potential, could be used to inform the structure and content of social work and community-based education and practice. To address inequitable conditions for those most impacted, community work encompassing critical transformative action addresses sociopolitical contexts that create and/or perpetuate privilege and oppression; creates alliances that validate the service users' knowledge and experiences; helps service users navigate inequitable systems of care, while simultaneously acting to change those systems; recognizes and challenges personal biases and the biases of others; and takes

collaborative action with communities to address socio-structural determinants of inequity (Jemal, 2017b). As individuals engage in critical action, “they move from a position of passivity, pessimism, victimization, and acceptance of the status quo to a role of collaboration in actively creating situations that are more just, liberating, and loving” (Alschuler, 1986, p. 493). Future research should compare the transformative action model to other community-based practice models to determine which, if any, are most effective for community practitioners as they address social injustice and inequitable social structures. With further research, transformative action may very well prove necessary to move persons from non-critical (i.e., destructive and avoidant) action toward anti-oppressive, individual and collective action to overcome and dismantle inequity, creating a healthier and more just and liberated society. Since systemic inequity is this country’s norm, critical action is needed to uproot systems grounded in patriarchy, colonialism, racism—and to plant on new ground.

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