THE CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK WOMEN ACTIVISTS:
A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION

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ACTIVISTS:

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Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Critical consciousness is important in that it helps oppressed people to broaden their analysis of personal problems, recognize the historical and political contexts in which those problems have developed, and thus occupy a better position from which to engage in actions which will address the root causes of oppression at a structural level. This study explored the process of critical consciousness development among a sample of U.S. Black women involved in social justice work. The study elicited the women’s perceptions of the conditions, influences, and processes that contributed to their conscientization. Such findings afford new insights into Black women’s resistance to multiple oppressions and contribute to a psychology of Black women that is rooted in their authentic experiences and worldviews. This study employed an interpretative phenomenological methodology and was based on observations and interviews with a purposefully selected sample of Black women within the United States.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This study explored the process of critical consciousness development among a sample of Black women in the United States. The purpose of this study was to elicit these women’s perceptions of the conditions, influences, processes, and experiences that contributed to their conscientization. It is anticipated that the knowledge generated from this study will afford new insights into Black women’s resistance to multiple oppressions and contribute to a psychology of Black women that is rooted in their authentic experiences and worldviews. This study employed a phenomenological qualitative methodology and was based on interviews with a purposefully selected sample of U.S. Black women who demonstrated high levels of critical consciousness. Though all of the participants of this study were located within the United States, the term “Black” is employed rather than “African-American” to acknowledge that these women might hold various national and ethnic affiliations.

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the background and context of this research. This overview is followed by descriptions of the problem, purpose, and questions addressed by the study. Also included in this chapter is a discussion of the research approach employed in this study, as well as the researcher’s subjective viewpoint on the
research topic. Finally, a discussion of the rationale and significance of the current work concludes the first chapter.

**Background and context of current study**

Multicultural and feminist scholars have noted for several decades that the discipline of psychology has historically been dominated by the interests and perspectives of White men (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2002). In contrast, the voices of Black women have been largely overlooked by both theoretical and empirical analyses (Jackson & Greene, 2000; Thomas, 2004). Even with contemporary increases in the use of Black women and girls as study participants, psychological research on this population tends to focus on special applications or problems rather than integrate Black females into the larger body of general psychological theory (Reid, 2004). In recent years, psychology researchers have called for a psychology of Black women that situates theory and research in the authentic contexts and experiences of Black women themselves (Reid & Kelly, 1994; Thomas & Miles, 1995; Thomas, 2004). This domain of psychological study would examine Black women because they are “important and inherently worthy of scientific attention in their own right, and not simply in comparison to Black men or White women” (Thomas, 2004, pg. 290). Such a psychology would need to acknowledge the diversity inherent in Black womanhood, since differences between Black women in areas such as class, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, ethnic affiliation, and political ideology make it impossible to speak of the Black female experience (James, 1999; Reid, 2004). Most importantly, the research and writing within a psychology of Black women must examine Black women’s motivations, cognitions, attitudes and
behaviors while taking into consideration the contextual and interactive effects of history, culture, race, class, gender, and multiple forms of oppression (Thomas, 2004). Thus, to adequately talk about Black women’s psychology, one must actually utilize an interdisciplinary lens.

Oppression has been defined as “the unjust use of power by one socially salient group over another in a way that creates and sustains inequity in the distribution of coveted resources” (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999, pg. 257). Black women in the United States have faced a long history of intersecting oppressions based on race, gender, and class (Collins, 1990). These multiple oppressions operate at all levels (i.e. personal, interpersonal, community, societal, and global) and in various realms of women’s lives including relationships, workplace, school, media, and the legal system. On a macro level, oppression results in a widespread disparity of essential resources (wealth, health, education, legal rights) between Black women and other groups (Johnson, 2006; Reid, 2004). On a microsocial level, researchers have highlighted the psychological distress caused by these layered and interacting forms of subjugation, linking racist and sexist events to mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and somatization among Black women in the United States (Carter, 2007; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010).

A less examined, but equally important, result of systemic oppression is the eventual internalization of that oppression, whereby members of subjugated groups begin to adopt the negative views and stereotypes that have been promulgated by their oppressors (Speight, 2007). Identity researchers have long recognized this human tendency to incorporate societal messages about one’s social group (and its place in the
social hierarchy) into one’s own self- and group- evaluations (Cross, 1978; Helms, 1990; Hardiman & Jackson, 1992). Black women are vulnerable to the internalization of social constructions of themselves as problematic entities within the Black community and society at large (Gainor, 1992). Routine practices of discrimination and disenfranchisement consistently challenge Black women’s self-worth and self-esteem.

Images of Black women promoted by media, educational systems, social rhetoric, and even social policies have consistently portrayed them as promiscuous, lazy, overbearing, and devious (Smith, 1990). Such images encourage all members of society to blame Black women for the problems of Black men, Black families, and society in general (Rousseau, 2009). Feminist poet Audre Lorde (1984) described, “we come together to each other coated in myths, stereotypes, and expectations from the outside, definitions not our own” (pg. 170). Black women who internalize such myths and stereotypes will tend to view themselves as inferior, think of themselves in a stereotypic fashion, and locate personal and social problems within themselves (hooks, 1993). This last tendency is especially problematic because personal behaviors and interpersonal relationships are embedded in larger structures of the community, society, economic system, and politics (Brofenbrenner, 1979). So even though some psychological problems can legitimately be traced to issues of oppression, a Black woman who has internalized this oppression will likely view all of her psychological problems in isolation, as indications of personal failure or weakness, and she will seek individual-level solutions without realizing how structural her personal issues might be. Watts-Jones (2002) argues that Blacks’ adoption of the assumption of their own inferiority is invisibly
embedded in the common presenting concerns of self-esteem, self-confidence, depression, and anxiety that individuals bring to therapy. Fanon (1967) described this process of internalized oppression extensively in his writings on the psychiatric conditions of colonized populations.

*Black women’s activism*

Though Black women are subject to numerous forms of oppression in U.S. society, they do not exist as mere victims. Instead, Black women have historically engaged in various acts of *resistance*, defined as the refusal to accept or comply, or the attempt to prevent something by action and/or argument (Merriam-Webster, 2011). For some women, resistance is characterized by standing in opposition to oppression, while for others it is the proactive search and enaction of alternative realities. The concept of resistance, as it specifically applies to Black women and girls, is described by Ward (1996) as “the refusal to allow oneself to be stifled by victimization or to accept an ideology of victim-blame” (pg. 89). Resistance is often closely linked to the concept of *activism*, or those intentional efforts to promote, impede or direct social, political, or economic change (Collins, 2000). Popova (2010) defines activism as “any action or set of actions, be it organized, grassroots or self-initiated, that aims to resolve a problem that diminishes the quality of life of individuals, communities or society.” Further, Baumgardner and Richards (2000) argue that a ‘regular woman becomes an activist when she rights some glaring human mistake, or recognizes a positive model of equality and takes the opportunity to build on it (pg. 148).” Acts of resistance and activism are related but often distinct from those that could be defined as *coping* mechanisms, helping Black
women to endure oppressive environments albeit in sometimes self-harming ways (Foster, 2010). Resistance represents a refusal to accept prevailing notions of oppressive structures, while activism goes a step beyond in order to actively challenge and/or change those structures. Based on these definitions, Black women as a group possess a long legacy of both resistance and activism in the United States.

Numerous scholars have described the ways in which Black women have actively struggled throughout history to question, confront, resist and change prevailing structures of domination (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1997; James, 1999; Olson, 2001). These efforts have often taken the form of participation in formally organized social movements for institutional transformation and legal, political and economic equality. Such efforts represent direct, overt stances against structures of oppression. Just as crucially, however, challenging oppression has been practiced as a matter of everyday life and survival for Black women, who construct and pass down psychological strategies for overcoming the ubiquitous degradation of Black female existence. These mechanisms represent a challenge to the status quo by replacing negative conceptualizations of Black womanhood with more affirming self-definitions and representations, and promoting a worldview that sees the lived experiences of Black women as significant (Collins, 2000).

Collins (2000) points out that for many Black women, ensuring mere survival for themselves and their families is a valid but under-acknowledged aspect of activism against racial and class oppression. She argues that historically, “struggles to transform U.S. educational, economic, and political institutions could not have been sustained” without an equally important struggle for group and individual survival (Collins, 2000,
Furthermore, many Black activists view their social change work as necessary to survival and consider activism the only way to maintain a sense of well-being in an unjust society (Foster, 2010). In other words, Blacks in the U.S. have always had to survive in order to fight, and fight in order to survive. Thus the line between survival and social justice work may be blurred or even non-existent in the minds of many Black women. Daily struggles to recognize, resist, and confront the web of multiple oppressions that threatens Black women’s existence and well-being can therefore take numerous forms, and Freire (1970) argues that critical consciousness is an essential component to all of these strategies.

Historically, Black women in the U.S. have aimed to eliminate discrimination in housing, employment, education, public accommodation, and political representation (Collins, 2000). This study acknowledges a long lineage of visible Black feminist activism in the United States including key figures such as Harriet Tubman, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Sojourner Truth, Septima Clark, Dorothy Height, Angela Davis, and a host of lesser-known women who risked their lives to combat the discriminatory policies and institutions that served to oppress them and others. These Black women played key roles in large-scale movements for women’s suffrage, anti-lynching, civil rights, and women’s liberation. In contemporary times, numerous Black women can be found challenging structural injustice in the areas of economics and labor, housing, prison, health, and violence against women (Neville & Hamer, 2006). Such activism blatantly challenges the rules dictating Black women’s subordination through collective action, formal organizing efforts, and political advocacy.
At the same time, this study recognizes that such visible struggles for institutional transformation are interdependent with what Collins (2000, pg. 204) refers to as the “first dimension” of Black women’s activism, the struggle for group survival. These struggles consist of actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures, and serve to resist oppressive forces primarily by undermining them. They are usually more subtle, avoiding direct challenge of oppressive structures, but are no less powerful. An example of such an action would be the “crafting of independent and oppositional identities for African American women,” thereby allowing minds to be free of the internalized oppression encouraged by dominating racial, gender, and class hierarchies (Collins, 2000, pg. 204). Another example would be Black women’s historical adoption of teaching roles in homes, schools, and churches which allowed them to promote education as a form of empowerment and racial uplift (Collins, 2000).

Thus, Black women’s activism can take the forms of both overt and covert resistance. This study assumes the stance of Freire (1970) who argued that both forms of resistance are fueled by an awareness of one’s connectedness to larger sociopolitical forces coupled with a desire to exact some change upon those forces (i.e., critical consciousness). By exploring the process of how this awareness and desire for change develops, this study aims to shed light on the role that such consciousness plays in the specific methods that these Black women choose to resist the multiple oppressions that they might face.
Critical consciousness

Because oppression occurs on both political and psychological fronts (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996), resistance that addresses both fronts is key to the interests of oppressed people, in this case Black women. One factor that has been identified as helpful in this process of resistance is the development of critical consciousness, an awareness of and a commitment to change, the socioeconomic, political and cultural forces that shape individual lives. The process of developing this awareness was termed conscientization by progressive Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1970).

Critical consciousness broadens oppressed people’s their analysis of personal problems, recognize the historical and political contexts in which those problems have developed, and thus be in a better position to engage in actions which will address the root causes at a structural level rather than focus solely on individual-level solutions and blame (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002). This concept contradicts the prevalent American emphasis on individualism, currently dominant in much of the psychological literature, of well-being and personal welfare being the concern of each isolated person. Psychologists have often been criticized for removing individuals from their sociohistorical context, attributing behaviors that are rooted in the social problems of a specific socioeconomic system to intrapsychic and individual factors (Bulhan, 1985; Prilleltensky, 1997). Critical consciousness insists that we pay attention to the connections between people, groups, and systems which together create the circumstances of individual lives. In developing critical consciousness, Black women
become empowered to improve both personal and collective circumstances by engaging in efforts that will resist large forces of oppression within their individual lives.

This study is concerned with the critical consciousness development of a particular subset of Black women in the United States—those who engage in activities designed to spur social change, whether small- or large-scale. Like many Black women, these women face the barriers and setbacks inherent within a racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist society. Despite this fact, they choose to move forward by actively challenging these barriers rather than passively accepting or succumbing to such oppressive forces. When these actions are done consciously and with the intention of enacting changes to an oppressive system, we might label these women “activists,” though for various reasons many Black women would never apply this descriptive label to themselves (Bobel, 2007).

Previous research has attempted to chronicle the development of Black women into activists through the use of narrative analysis (Neville and Hamer, 2006). This research revealed common themes such as the role of the political climate, presence of role models, and early experiences of discrimination in the lives of women who elected to consciously fight against oppression. Though insightful, this research focused mainly upon women’s experiences of activism and did not provide an in-depth analysis of the ways they developed critical consciousness in the first place. The current study attempts to more fully explore this aspect of activists’ development.

Critical consciousness represents the ability to name, reflect upon, and act against oppressive forces. It is not synonymous with activism, but might instead be seen as a
potential catalyst in the development of an activist orientation. Thus, one cannot assume that all activists are critically conscious, since people might choose to engage in activist efforts for a multitude of reasons, and perhaps with very little awareness of the larger issues they are fighting. However, Freire’s definition of critical consciousness does imply that a critically conscious person will find some way to act against oppression, though that action may take different forms based on the social and political context of the person’s life.

It should be noted that much of the literature surrounding critical consciousness tends to assume a left-leaning, progressive or liberal stance (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). This appears inherent in the nature of the construct, based in a worldview that advocates change and refuses to see social and economic inequities as reflective of a “natural” human hierarchy. This study recognizes that critical thought can, in and of itself, lead to a variety of ideological positions. However, my personal leanings (left/progressive) and those of the relevant research undoubtedly color my treatment of this topic as well as the structure of the current study.

The current study

Overall, scholars have suggested that the development of critical consciousness (conscientization) empowers oppressed groups to improve personal and collective circumstances by recognizing the role of social, political, and cultural forces in shaping their individual well-being (Freire, 1970; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). However, there remains a strong cultural push for Black women to not develop this consciousness and instead internalize oppressive worldviews, locating
the root cause of various psychological and social problems within themselves (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1993; Rousseau, 2009). Because such internalization is believed to negatively impact Black women’s mental health and well-being (Abdullah, 1998; Speight, 2007; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010; Watts-Jones, 2002), and impede their commitment to effective social action (McGuire, Stewart, & Curtin, 2010; Moane, 2010), it would be helpful to understand how critical consciousness can be developed and promoted among Black women. Yet there is little empirical data which identifies the factors associated with high levels of critical consciousness among Black women. Neville and Hamer (2006) offer the only empirical research that has explored the concept of consciousness development within this population. Their work, while valuable, focused specifically on political consciousness and was too cursory to offer an in-depth look at the processes of development.

The purpose of the current study was to explore Black women’s perceptions of the conditions, influences, processes, and experiences that contributed to their conscientization. In so doing, this study aimed to contribute to a psychology of Black women rooted in their own contexts and experiences. Findings are based on in-depth interviews with a sample of purposefully selected Black women who possess a critical awareness of social forces, an understanding of how these forces relate to their individual circumstances, and a commitment to social action which challenges oppression.

The specific research questions that this study attempted to address were: How do participants define critical consciousness? How have they developed critical
consciousness, and what factors have helped/hindered these efforts? How does their critical consciousness impact their daily lives and efforts toward social change?

Research approach

This study examined the development of critical consciousness among Black women. As such, it was appropriate to utilize a critical approach that acknowledges dynamics of power and domination in society. Critical theory emerged from Marxism in the first half of the 20th century and is concerned with exposing relationships involving power inequities, domination, and oppression (Willis, 2007). Unlike Marxism, critical theory explores a wide range of power relationships, including those based on gender, race, and ethnicity, in addition to social class. Since the late 1980s this paradigm has included such perspectives as feminist, racialized discourse, queer theory, and disability inquiry (Creswell, 2003).

Black Feminist theory is an aspect of the critical paradigm that aims to conceptualize “African-American women’s struggles against intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 1990, pg. 32). As an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, it conceptualizes and analyzes the effect of multiple and intersecting identities and oppressions on the actual experiences of Black women, emphasizing Black women’s methods of coping, surviving, resisting, and acting to change systems of domination (hooks, 1995).

Black Feminist theory embraces both African-centered and feminist perspectives to better understand and articulate the unique and self-defined viewpoint of Black women (Collins, 1990). In so doing, it places Black women at the center of analyses and honors the lived experiences and perceptions of women enmeshed in “the multiplicity of race,
ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and other factors forming the basis for oppression” (Thomas, 2004, pg. 294). This study used a Black feminist theoretical framework to ensure that participant contexts, including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, and geographical location, along with intrapsychic variables and personal histories, were considered as a part of their stories and as part of their data.

Because this study seeks new and previously unexplored understandings of Black women’s critical consciousness, a qualitative stance was chosen to address the aforementioned research questions. Smith (2003) argues that qualitative psychological research is appropriate when the goal is to provide a richly descriptive account of perceptions or understandings of a complex phenomenon. Furthermore, qualitative inquiry permits a researcher to understand the worldview of participants by listening intensely, respecting participants’ interpretations of events, and engaging in prolonged interactions which can be transformative for both researcher and participant (Ponterotto, 2010). Qualitative inquiry allows for the discovery of new ideas that emerge throughout the research process, without the imposition of pre-selected and limited variables upon participants (Hill, 2005). This is especially relevant to the psychology of Black women and other marginalized social groups whose indigenous viewpoints are often overlooked by research approaches rooted in positivist and postpositivist paradigms (Ponterotto, 2010). As the researcher my intent was to explore, describe, and interpret the personal and social experiences of participants rather than explain, quantify or measure them. Thus, a qualitative method was chosen that would allow the women’s experiences to be
understood from their own perspective, within their own contexts, and in their own voices.

The specific qualitative method used in this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In general, phenomenology is an approach involving the identification of the essence of a particular human experience (Welton, 1999). Adopting a phenomenological attitude means to become reflexive, stepping outside of one’s experience in order to examine one’s perception of that experience. IPA is a derivative of this tradition, emphasizing participants’ reflections upon their own experience and developing an understanding of how they relate to, involve themselves in, and make sense of a particular process or event. IPA is committed to idiographic study, aiming to provide detailed, nuanced analyses of particular experiences within a small number of participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The goal is to do justice to the complexity of human lived experience by privileging depth rather than breadth in data-gathering.

Rationale and significance

The rationale for this study emanates from my desire to understand how critical consciousness is cultivated in the minds of people facing multiple forms of social oppression. Learning about how individuals define and utilize this way of thinking about the world provides a more nuanced and sophisticated perspective on the concept of critical consciousness and the process by which it develops. Increased understanding of this process may lead to the development of interventions, programs, or further research to promote critical consciousness among Black women and possibly even other groups of
people facing subjugation and exploitation. Thus, information from this study could possibly support the empowerment of Black women and other oppressed groups. In the long run, such empowerment may help oppressed people challenge the systems of domination which threaten their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being on a daily basis. A short-term, but potentially significant outcome is that this study highlights individual participants’ stories in a manner that helps the participants themselves to reflect upon their lives in a conscious and powerful way. Such reflection can be transformative for researchers, participants, and readers alike as previously held conceptions and stereotypes of Black women are suspended, analyzed, and challenged throughout the research process (Ponterotto, 2010), providing a snapshot of critical consciousness development through real lived experiences.
This study explored the process of critical consciousness development among a sample of U.S. Black women who challenge oppression in various ways. The purpose of this study was to elicit these women’s perceptions of the conditions, influences, processes, and experiences that contributed to their conscientization. This chapter will provide an overview of literature relevant to Black women’s resistance and activism, the construct of critical consciousness, proposed models of critical consciousness development, and finally the critical consciousness development of Black women.

*Black women – resistance and activism*

“We find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women’s extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of White male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes…Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to White male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways.”

Combahee River Collective Statement (1982)

History scholars have noted that Black women in the US have traditionally faced various forms of oppression due to the intersections of devalued race, gender, and often
class identities (Millward, 2007; Olson, 2001; White, 1985). Through this simultaneous interaction of gender, race, and class, Black women have acquired what has been termed a “multiple consciousness,” a set of cognitive processing skills from which can emerge a multifaceted critique of oppression and a multidimensional view of liberation and humanization (Harvell, 2010). By all accounts, many Black women in the U.S. can be said to have engaged in both resistance and activism since their introduction into the patriarchal, slave-based system of colonial-era America (Millward, 2007).

Resistance, defined as “the development of a unique cultural and political perspective…that stands against that which is perceived as unjust and oppressive” (Ward, pg. 87), has been a standard theme in studies of African American women’s history (Millward, 2007). Efforts to resist include everyday practices such as enslaved women’s attempts to avoid sexual exploitation by white slave-owners and contemporary women’s rejection of racially and sexually offensive music videos (Millward, 2007).

As a response to existing power structures, resistance is interdependently linked to activism, the intentional efforts to challenge oppressive structures and bring about social, cultural, economic and/or political change (Collins, 2000). Black women’s activism has included such endeavors as the creation of Black women’s clubs in the 19th century (Harvell, 2010), the anti-lynching crusade of the late 1800s (James, 1999), women-organized bus boycotts in the 1950s (Brooks, 2008), and the current campaigns to challenge biased reproductive health and welfare reform policies (Rousseau, 2009).

The history of Black women’s activism in the United States is a long and complex one. Today’s Black women activists continue a tradition which began with Black
women’s first experiences of oppression in this country. From slave rebellions and the abolitionist movement to the fight for civil rights and economic justice, Black women possess a “remarkable legacy of activism, courage, and rebellion” (Olson, 2001, pg. 16). No strangers to oppression, they have been leaders in the fight to end it. Historians note the integral, albeit overlooked, roles played by Black women in social change movements throughout history.

Historians and sociologists such as Davis (1981), Hine and Thompson (1999), and Collier-Thomas and Franklin (2001) have documented the myriad ways that Black women in the U.S. have resisted their oppression. Still, the struggles of Black women to gain freedom and equality have been given scant attention in the mainstream historical discourse (James, 1999). Black women activists such as Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Angela Davis rightfully enjoy some level of acclaim within the broader American culture. Social change agents like Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ida B. Wells are lesser known and highly under-credited for their tremendous contributions to the U.S. democratic system. Other activists such as Maria Stewart, Daisy Bates, Diane Nash, Ella Baker, and Elaine Jones are dreadfully absent from our collective consciousness as well as our public discourse on U.S. history, Black history, women’s history, and the chronicles of social movements. Then, of course, there are the generations of countless unacknowledged Black women of all classes and creeds who endured daily physical, emotional, and spiritual assaults in order to preserve themselves, their families, and their communities. Many of these women strove not only to help their
people survive, but to *thrive*, and in so doing actively challenged a societal status quo which had deemed Black lives virtually worthless.

Many enslaved women who were born the property of White men spent their days in the fields and plantation homes and their nights secretly plotting for freedom. They “resisted and advocated challenges to slavery at every turn” (Davis, 1981, pg. 21). Historians of the slave period note that “the Negro woman so often urged haste in slave plotting” (Aptheker, 1983, p. 259). Enslaved Black women sang coded songs and told stories laced with plans for liberation. They risked death and fled with their loved ones to places where they could (in theory) be free. They took part in slave rebellions and played pivotal roles in the abolition movement, all the while in danger of losing their lives and all that they cherished. As early as 1642, secret communities of fugitive slaves and their descendents could be found throughout the South. When discovered by authorities and forced to defend their freedom, Black women were known to fight on equal terms with Black men, and were “unrelenting” in their resistance against re-enslavement (Davis, 1981). In more subtle ways, Black women resisted oppression by secretly learning to read and teaching others, running “midnight schools” for the acquisition of reading and writing skills among the enslaved. Though constantly subject to the use of rape and sexual coercion as an instrument of domination, Black women bravely raised their voices against this sexual terrorism in much of their speaking and writing throughout the period of slavery. For example, feminist poet Frances E.W. Harper and educator Charlotte Forten were two free Black women abolitionists in the North who lectured regularly against the treatment of slave women throughout the 1850-60s (Davis, 1981).
Later, enslaved women’s descendents would honor this resistance by continuing the tradition. During World War I, working class Black women initiated and led political and economic movements which challenged their White employers and White supremacy as a whole (Brown, 2006). Their middle-class sisters petitioned donations and conserved resources to support Black troops while simultaneously organizing to combat segregation and racism in national organizations such as the YWCA and the Red Cross. Black women were active in labor unions and suffrage movements. They formed clubs such as the National Association of Colored Women which aimed to set political agendas for Black communities, with Black women at the helm. Eva Bowles, a New York city social worker and the first director of the Bureau of Colored Work at the YWCA, stated in 1919, “Our present status of the colored race and the real leaders of the country is due in fact that as colored women we have shared in the plans and promotions with equal justice and opportunity. We can never afford to lose this fundamental principle through compromise” (Brown, 2006, pg. 83).

Yet the 1920s ushered in a new direction for Black women’s activism as the grassroots New Negro Movement placed the focus on Black men’s political agency, complete with decidedly male-centered organizations such as the NAACP and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Black women’s political empowerment lost prominence as the agenda shifted to the advancement of the race, rather than the equality of the sexes. Black women, though feeling the future of their own organizations challenged, continued to draw upon their legacy of activism to embrace identities as “race women,” consciously taking up the battle to end segregation, secure
voting rights, abolish lynching and mob violence, and reaffirm the legitimacy of Black culture (Brown, 2006).

Decades later, this struggle for individual and collective empowerment would continue as the Civil Rights movement took shape. Washerwomen, sharecroppers, schoolteachers, nurses, and college instructors alike took it upon themselves to engage in such life- and livelihood-threatening activities as registering to vote, sitting in the fronts of public buses, and demanding customer service at the local stores where they regularly spent their money (Olson, 2001). Numerous women initiated and dedicated themselves to civil rights organizations, protests, boycotts, and sit-ins. They canvassed neighborhoods and registered other Blacks to vote. They advocated for Black children to gain access to high quality education and created their own schools when they saw fit. They battled against lynching and segregation and police brutality; they fought for civil rights and women’s rights and equitable education policies. Through their churches and women’s clubs, they kept social justice on the agenda. Through political organizing, education, and public discourse they kept social consciousness in the forefront. Some battled oppression with nonviolence and others while toting rifles. Some took up the fight on intellectual and cultural fronts while others stepped into political, religious, and scientific arenas. (Brown, 2006; Davis, 1981; Olson, 2001; White, 2008).

Whether navigating urban or rural battlegrounds, Black women that challenged oppression faced the constant threat (and frequent occurrence) of violence, loss of livelihood, and degradation of character. According to researchers of this period (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001; Gore, Theoharis, and Woodard, 2009; Olson, 2001), women
were murdered, beaten, raped, followed, harassed, threatened, fired from jobs, subjected to bombings and arsons of their homes, and had loved ones threatened or injured. As a population that had always been defined as laborers, they were not afforded the ideological distinction of “feminine creatures,” and thus were not spared the harshest blows and cruelest punishments for their refusal to be dominated. (Davis, 1981; Olson, 2001). Black women during this period faced the ugliness of fierce, racist hatred (both personal and systemic) coupled with the confines of a patriarchal social framework that wished to deny them full humanity on the basis of gender. Black women in the U.S. have historically been born into a context where their development is hemmed in by race, gender, and often class. Thus, Black women who chose to exercise self-determination, one could argue, were activists whether they knew it or not. The very act of defining themselves and acting with self-respect and autonomy challenged the dictates of an oppressive social context. Those Black women that consciously engaged in efforts toward social change were taking an especially bold stance.

Despite their activist efforts having long been under-recognized, undervalued, and even misattributed to others (James, 1999; Olsen, 2001), Black women have nonetheless served as exemplars of humanist principles through their activism, which has always upheld the predominance of human needs, honored the sacredness of the human spirit, and recognized the responsibility of the individual toward the collective (Harvell, 2010). Indeed, Black women’s organizing around prominent issues affecting the Black community in the 19th and 20th centuries (e.g., economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, segregation, lynching, educational inequities, slum landlords, rent
gouging, deficient sanitation systems, and inadequate health facilities) benefitted not only their own Black communities but poor and working-class White families as well (Harvell, 2010). Similarly, contemporary Black women tackle issues as broad and diverse as economics and labor, housing, education, criminal justice, reproductive rights and health care, media justice, environmental issues, and violence against women (James, 1999; Martin, 2010; Neville & Hamer, 2006). Black women’s activism today spans the range from involvement in conventional politics (electoral politics and appointed office) to Black female radicalism (anti-racism, anti-patriarchy, and anti-institutional). Black women work to achieve social justice in both highly visible public realms and in the more private realms of religious communities, neighborhood schools, and cultural centers (James, 1999).

Dodson and Gilkes (1986) have argued that “the ties that bind the black community together exist primarily because of the vigilant action of black women. . . . The overwhelming importance and pivotal position of black women in all aspects of community organization—education, civil rights, organized labor, business, politics, religion, the professions, and club work—earned them the greatest accolades and the most pernicious stereotypes. . . . [The] black women of the twentieth century were the source of community endurance…enabling black people to resist and to hope” (p. 81). What internal conditions have allowed many Black women to maintain such a bold stance under overwhelmingly degrading external conditions? Few scholars have examined the psychological processes involved in Black women’s choices to consciously stand against oppression and work towards social change.
Critical consciousness – definition and history

Critical consciousness is a termed coined by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who described it as an awareness of the social, economic, political, cultural, and psychological factors that determine the lives of individuals and groups (Freire, 1970, 1973). Since Freire’s introduction of the term, scholars from numerous fields have identified critical consciousness as a key element in recognizing and challenging social oppression.

“With critical consciousness, individuals can identify both external oppression and self-imposed internal oppression. Critical consciousness is aimed at ending fatalism so that one can free oneself from self-imposed powerlessness. It is a process in which changes in one’s internal world result in taking actions to change one’s external world, and taking actions changes one’s internal world. Critical consciousness cannot be learned in a top-down manner. It is essentially a self-education process among equals…instead of being acted upon, they are taking actions, learning, and then taking even more powerful actions.” (Levine, 2011, pg. 134)

Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) argue that political and psychological oppression complement one another, since political, social, and economic barriers are often held in place through the dissemination of “psychological myths concerning the ‘just nature’ of the present state of affairs” (pg. 132). Thus, as first articulated by revolutionary psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (Bulhan, 1985), psychological oppression is grounded in political oppression, and political oppression is maintained by psychological oppression. These two forms of oppression operate at all levels of analysis (i.e. intrapersonal, interpersonal, social group, state, international). At the intrapersonal level, psychological processes operating within the individual such as learned helplessness, obedience to authority, a pessimistic explanatory style and internalization of an inferior identity appear
to contribute to the acceptance of oppression (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Similar
dynamics exist at each level and serve to maintain the existing power hierarchy.

Likewise, liberation is both an internal and external process (Bulhan, 1985). Some
psychological processes serve to overcome, rather than maintain, political oppression.
One such process, termed *conscientization* by Freire (1970) in his seminal text *Pedagogy
of the Oppressed*, refers to the development of critical consciousness. Critical
consciousness then serves as the foundation for liberation. It has been described as a way
of knowing, a critical analysis of reality, a way of experiencing a sense of connectedness
with reality, and as a process of collective dialogue or co-construction in the course of
social interaction (Mustakova-Possardt, 1998). It has also been defined as a “general
awareness of the systems of privilege and oppression, as well as an understanding of how
those systems operate within local contexts” (Garcia, Kosutic, McDowell, & Anderson,
2009, pg. 20). Freire’s philosophical understanding of critical consciousness has been
operationalized by some researchers in education and sociology as the ability to name,
reflect on, and act upon problems presented by oppressive social dynamics (Elias, 1976;
Smith, 1976). This reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it is what
Freire (1970) called *praxis*, and represents a way for oppressed people to both acquire a
critical awareness of their condition and achieve liberation.

Love (2000) argues that four elements must be present in order for one to engage
in praxis and commit herself to social justice work. These four elements include
awareness (staying “awake” to the ways oppression happens in one’s daily life), analysis
(noticing and thinking critically about the world), action (participating in efforts toward
liberation by organizing, supporting, locating resources, etc.) and accountability (working in connection and cooperation with others). With these four elements in place, a person can be said to be engaging in praxis through which they may acquire critical consciousness.

The concept of critical consciousness has been especially influential in the field of education, where proponents of critical pedagogy have written extensively about it (Giroux, 2003; McLaren, 2006). The construct of critical consciousness has also extended into mental health disciplines such as family therapy (Hernandez, Almeida, & Dolan-Delvecchio, 2005), feminist psychology (Moane, 2010), community psychology (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003), psychiatry, social work, social psychology, clinical psychology and counseling psychology (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Prilleltensky (1997) argued that the causes and consequences of some clinical problems reflect political, economic, and psychological oppression and thus require societal, institutional, as well as internal solutions. The mental health field’s adoption of the construct suggests that critical consciousness may play a role in the development in such far-reaching solutions. Indeed, critical consciousness is theorized by Watts et. al. (1999) to be one “antidote” to oppression by serving as an internal resource to draw upon in both resisting oppression and overcoming sociopolitical barriers.

Critical consciousness – measurement

Though the construct is popular in much conceptual and theoretical writing, few psychological researchers have attempted to quantitatively measure critical consciousness. The exception is Diemer and Blustein (2005), who examined the
relationship between critical consciousness and career development in urban youth.

These researchers conceptualized critical consciousness as inversely related to Social Dominance Orientation, a worldview which generally endorses the dominance of one socially constructed group (i.e., race, class, gender, etc.) over another and avoids critical questioning of existing social hierarchies. Thus, the researchers measured critical consciousness by inversely scoring a scale from the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) inventory developed by Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle (1994). They also utilized the Sociopolitical Control Scale (SPCS; Zimmerman and Zahniser, 1991) to measure participants’ perceived capacity to act effectively within the sociopolitical sphere. These two components – social dominance orientation and sociopolitical control – were presumed analogous to the “awareness” and “action” components of critical consciousness. In general, such quantitative measurement is helpful in providing evidence for the existence of critical consciousness, at least as defined by the researchers and as it relates to other established psychological constructs. Diemer and Blustein (2005) obtained an α of .85 on the SDO and .77 on the SPCS, suggesting that these measures were reliable. However, no other work has been conducted to confirm or challenge the validity of this approach to quantitatively measuring critical consciousness.

Critical consciousness – models of development

Counseling psychologists rely on a developmental perspective which acknowledges that people grow and change throughout their lifetimes. This perspective posits that most human characteristics are not rigidly fixed at birth but evolve in conjunction with key physiological, psychological, and environmental events taking
place within and around the individual. This developmental outlook is important because it allows counseling psychologists to focus on the strengths and adaptive strategies of individuals and groups across the lifespan (APA Division 17, 2012). Inasmuch as critical consciousness is an adaptive strategy for challenging oppressive conditions, it is useful to recognize that it can grow and change throughout one’s life. Furthermore, the developmental perspective suggests that there are ways in which critical consciousness can be influenced and shaped over time by key factors both within and outside of the individual.

Theorists have adopted this developmental perspective in order to explain how and when people come to possess critical consciousness. Freire (1973) described three stages of critical consciousness development. The first stage, “semi-intransitive” consciousness, centers interests on issues of biological survival. Individuals in this stage “lack a sense of life on a more historical plane” (pg. 17) and thus, experience a sense of disengagement with their own existence in the world. In the second stage, “magical consciousness,” an individual perceives social facts but attributes them to a “superior power by which [she] is controlled and to which [she] must therefore submit” (pg. 44). The stage of “naïve transitivity” is characterized by an “oversimplification of problems…a nostalgia for the past…underestimation of the common man…a strong tendency to gregariousness…fragility of argument…the practice of polemics rather than dialogue” (pg. 18). To Freire, these three stages represent stops en route to critical consciousness, but may also be ends unto themselves if proper evolution does not take place. Even worse, a person may move from naïve transitivity, not into critical
consciousness, but instead into “fanaticized consciousness,” in which she becomes even more disengaged from reality and experiences a distortion of reason which makes transformative dialogue almost impossible (Freire, 1973). Though Freire provides this developmental model, no empirical tests have been conducted to verify whether people experience or move through these stages. And though Freire (1970) clearly argues that liberation-focused education plays a major role in moving people toward consciousness, no empirical evidence is provided of additional factors that may help an individual achieve critical consciousness rather than become stagnant in either of the preceding phases. There is also no evidence that these stages are linear, rather than cyclical, or that an individual must experience each of these stages before reaching high levels of critical consciousness.

Martin-Baro (1994) elaborated on how critical consciousness develops by stating that human beings are transformed by changing their realities. He proposed that by decoding their worlds, people could grasp the mechanisms of oppression (achieve critical consciousness), a process which would make possible new practices and forms of consciousness. The new knowledge of themselves and their reality would provide people with new social identities, and they would begin to discover themselves through the mastery of nature and their active social roles. Thus, Martin-Baro argued that through dialogue, connection, and social action, people could transform themselves and their communities simultaneously. Though he is clear that critical consciousness involves a critique of social institutions coupled with joint efforts toward change within these institutions, his description of how this occurs is vague. Like Freire, Martin-Baro
provides a useful theoretical model but no empirical evidence for his notion of critical consciousness development.

However, some researchers have provided empirical data to support their own developmental models of critical consciousness. Utilizing interview data with 28 middle-aged men and women in Boston and Bulgaria, Mustakova-Possardt (1998) examined the pathways by which participants came to question the power relations within their social environment, develop concern with issues of social justice, create alternative visions of how things should be, and feel compelled to transform social conditions. This cross-cultural research incorporated the concept of moral motivation, a philosophical term that describes the ways in which individuals are moved to act upon what they deem right or good. Moral motivation was revealed to spur the development of critical consciousness by helping to bridge personal issues (what is right/good for oneself) with social concerns (what is right/good for all).

Mustakova-Possardt (1998) identified three stages of critical consciousness development. Her study described periods of pre-critical consciousness (during which a person either forms moral motivation or embarks on a non-critical consciousness pathway into adulthood), transitional critical consciousness (during which a person increasingly identifies patterns in her social reality, questions her personal role and responsibility within this social reality, and grapples with internal contradictions), and critical consciousness (represented by a social consciousness fully able to deconstruct its social milieu and engage in a “critical moral dialogue with its socio-historical world” (pg. 22). Within her sample of 28, Mustakova-Possardt (1998) identified six participants as
representing a fully formed critical consciousness. She described such individuals as “relatively disembedded from and engaged in relationships with their social environment; and they relate to socio-political allegiances…social consciousness, and possible social activism. These people problematize their social environment, bringing moral frames of reference to it. They often attempt to apply spiritual understanding to socio-political reality, and rely heavily on self-reflection in their efforts to bring inner and outer life into harmony” (pg. 22).

Though Mustakova-Possardt contributes to a conceptualization of the “critical consciousness pathway” (pg. 27), she does not attempt to examine how people enter and leave this pathway or progress through it. Her work is primarily theoretical, describing categories without exploring participants’ lived experience of the various stages or their own understanding of the development process. Furthermore, her cross-cultural sample spanned a range of ethnicities, genders, occupations and social environments, not really allowing for an in-depth understanding of one particular context of experience.

Watts and Abdul-Adil (1998) also suggest a sequential order to the evolution of critical consciousness. Their five stages include: acritical (belief in a just world prevails, and the individual is unaware of power inequities that impact their lives), adaptive (individual acknowledges power differentials but see the social structure as unchangeable and therefore attempt only to adapt to the current system), pre-critical (individual experiences an emerging understanding of asymmetrical power relations and begin to question the system), critical (individual has deeper realization of sources of oppression and feels an impulse to work toward social change), and liberation (oppression becomes
obvious, and individual combines awareness with involvement in social and/or political action to eradicate injustice).

The authors applied this developmental model to the creation of their Young Warriors hip-hop based media literacy program for African-American young men (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002), but did not explore whether or how their participants actually progressed through the stages as theorized. Instead, the researchers intervened in the young men’s development with education and dialogue regarding sociopolitical issues. Though the researchers explore the connection between critical consciousness development and social change efforts, their discussion focused mainly on the community activism and civic participation of Black youth, neglecting the less visible forms of resistance often enacted by Black women and other groups historically marginalized within large-scale social movements.

Beyond stage models, other researchers have looked for key factors, conditions, and processes in the critical consciousness development of specific populations. Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) noted that critical consciousness requires a high level of cognitive resources, including the ability to constantly think about one’s various roles, positions, and standpoints in regard to oppression. Similarly, Quintana and Segura-Herrera (2003) applied a social cognitive approach to the process of critical consciousness development, noting that certain cognitive skills – assuming the perspective of another and formulating a generalized perspective of other racial groups – must be present in order for one to recognize bias and contest the legitimacy of oppression. These authors studied a group of Mayan-descended children in Guatemala, noting the pivotal role of ethnic perspective-
taking ability in the subsequent development of critical consciousness. It is important to be aware that certain cognitive processes may be universally relevant to the critical examination of sociopolitical dynamics. However, it is unclear how these authors’ findings relate to adult populations of different cultural contexts, specifically Black women in the United States, and what other factors outside of cognitive ability might contribute to conscientization.

Osajima (2007) examined the critical consciousness of Asian American activists and found common themes in their development. The 30 activists interviewed for the study emphasized “meaningful education,” (pg. 64) mainly college courses in Asian American studies and participation in Asian student groups, as key influences in the development of their critical perspectives. These educational experiences helped participants to engage in what Freire (1973) termed “naming the world,” recognizing the existence and impact of social conditions on their own lives. Participants also described conscientization as a social process that, in connecting them to other Asian Americans with similar familial and cultural experiences, allowed them to feel less isolated and thus challenge their individualistic interpretations of reality. Such connections provided crucial support for the conscientization process. They also provided a setting for both the cognitive (i.e., knowledge of patterns and systems) and affective (i.e., enthusiasm about learning, feeling safe to ask questions and explore new ideas) aspects of consciousness to develop.

Perhaps most importantly is Osajima’s conclusion that for most participants, conscientization was not a linear, but an “iterative process combining new knowledge
and perspectives, social action or practice, and reflection, what Freire calls ‘praxis’.” (pg. 72) Participants consistently described overlapping experiences of receiving new information, feeling social support, reflecting upon their lives, taking action, experiencing deepened knowledge based on those actions, widening their social connections, reflecting on these events, and learning from these experiences in a way that allowed the entire cycle to be repeated in various ways. This study fills in many of the gaps left by the aforementioned studies which attempted to describe conscientization as a discrete and linear process, yet it describes an Asian American experience which may or may not be similar for Black women.

Black women’s critical consciousness development

Though Black women’s history of resistance in the United States demonstrates that Black women have consistently attained and worked to change their social conditions, little empirical research examines the processes by which Black women come to experience this frame of mind. Neville & Hamer (2006), using the life narratives of seven Black women involved in revolutionary activism, provided a brief review of the women’s journeys toward critical consciousness and collective action. The researchers focused their attention on “everyday activists” (pg. 3) who may not have labeled themselves as revolutionary or feminist, but whose activism was found to be consistent with Black revolutionary feminist principles. The narrative analysis revealed common processes related to the women’s political consciousness development, including the role of the larger political climate in which most of the women grew up (1960s and 1970s). Growing up Black and poor (or working-
class) informed many of the women’s experiences, as did the presence of strong female role models in their homes or communities. Personal experiences with oppression appeared to fuel the development of political consciousness, and early efforts to engage in political activity were met with success. Such experiences instilled a sense of efficacy that appeared to be a crucial element for many of the participants in this study. Other shared experiences included the challenges to Black feminist activism, such as strain on personal relationships, safety concerns, demise of important activist organizations, lack of emotional support and financial hardship.

The current study aimed to extend Neville and Hamer’s (2006) examination of the ways in which Black women who resist oppression come to develop high levels of critical consciousness and social action. One critique of Neville and Hamer (2006) is their use of written life narratives to elicit the women’s experiences, which could not engage participants in active dialogue. I believe that such a dialogue may have produced more personal and introspective responses. In addition, although Neville and Hamer (2006) examined both influences on development and common challenges to political activism, this study focuses more exclusively on the development of critical consciousness. Neville and Hamer’s study, while informative, could only briefly summarize the various themes which emerged in response to each research question. The present study focused more narrowly on the aspect of critical consciousness development in order to provide a more thorough and detailed analysis of this topic.

Overall, the literature suggests that critical consciousness serves as a strong foundation for social justice by combining a critical awareness of social oppression with
a drive to take transformative action upon one’s social environment. Critical consciousness can be understood as developing over time and having a strong influence over whether individuals choose to engage in resistance or activism against oppression. Though Black women activists have contributed much to struggles against oppression in the United States, we know relatively little about their experiences of developing critical consciousness. More study on this topic is warranted, especially in the field of counseling psychology, since critical consciousness represents an adaptive strategy in combating the negative effects of intersecting oppressions. The current study helps to elucidate key factors and conditions that psychologists may build upon in helping Black women to challenge and overcome forces of oppression.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Introduction and overview

This study explored the process of critical consciousness development among a sample of Black women in the United States. The purpose of this study was to elicit these women’s perceptions of the conditions, influences, processes, and experiences that contributed to their conscientization. It is anticipated that the knowledge generated from this study will afford new insights into Black women’s resistance to multiple oppressions and contribute to a psychology of Black women that is rooted in their authentic experiences and worldviews.

This chapter will describe the methods of the current study, and will include the study’s assumptions, information about the researcher, and details pertaining to the study’s research method, participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of the study’s ethical considerations, as well as its potential limitations.

Assumptions

In conducting this research, I operated under certain assumptions that are grounded in my experiences as a Black woman and as a student of psychology. First, it was assumed that Black women as a group occupy a distinct position in American society
and thus possess a unique perspective on the social, political, and cultural contexts of their lives. Secondly, it was assumed that critical consciousness is a desirable goal for Black women, and is helpful in combating oppression and the mental health concerns related to this oppression. Third, it was assumed that critical consciousness develops over time, and is not an end state as much as it is an ongoing process of growth and development. It is possible, therefore, to be more conscious than one was in the past, or to be somewhat conscious of sociopolitical patterns, yet not possess full awareness. Finally, I assumed that participants would be able to think and speak openly about this process of development, and could describe their level of critical consciousness from a deliberate, introspective stance.

The researcher

To a certain extent, this study represents a form of “me-search” in that it is research heavily tied to my personal identity (Yoshino, 2006). At the same time, it represents an attempt on my part to step out of my own experience into the worlds of others whose unique life histories, perspectives, and life courses may differ significantly from my own.

I am a Black woman pursuing a doctoral degree in Counseling Psychology at a predominantly White institution in the Midwestern United States. I am also a wife and mother, a writer, and a woman who identifies herself as a social justice advocate. Like most Black women in the U.S., I have been subject to multiple forms of oppression. Throughout my life, I have been most conscious of the oppression and discrimination I faced due to my race and gender. My lower-middle class upbringing made me vulnerable
to some levels of class oppression, but simultaneously made it possible for my parents to provide a relatively secure home life, access to material resources, and both private high school and college education. Thus, I have also benefitted from various privileges within my life. These include my status as a U.S. citizen, my identification as a heterosexual, and my marriage into a wealthy and highly educated family. My personal and professional experiences with these various privileges and oppressions have led to a strong interest in the concept of critical consciousness, and I approached this study as an individual engaged in my own process of critical consciousness development.

For me, this has meant reading books, taking classes, and speaking to people that broaden my awareness of the large-scale social issues which impact both my individual life and the realities present in my surrounding community. It has also meant working with organizations that I perceive to be addressing these realities through programming and events that serve to challenge dominant oppressive systems. I have engaged in processes of both political (e.g., voting, attending rallies, contacting legislators) and psychological (e.g., thinking critically about media images, rejecting Eurocentric beauty standards, teaching my children to respect Black women) resistance to oppression throughout my life.

Though I cannot pinpoint (and did not expect to find) just one specific motivating factor for these behaviors, I can recall that I have always been drawn toward a more critical and activist stance in regard to living with oppression. I believe that the combination of pro-Black racial socialization by socially conscious parents and my enrollment in an Afrocentric elementary school laid the early foundation for my
development toward questioning the status quo of racial and gender hierarchies that I observed in my larger community. As a teen, I was active in several grassroots organizations and engaged in community organizing activities with the support of my peers and parents. Such experiences not only made me feel empowered to enact change in my community, but also encouraged me to seek more education around the specific social and political issues most prevalent in predominantly low-income, African American neighborhoods like my own. Throughout college and graduate school, I have maintained this interest in gaining an intellectual understanding of the poverty, racism, and sexism which affect my community. I have also struggled to ensure that I am having some impact on these issues through my professional work as a psychologist.

Thus, my own experiences of critical consciousness development have provided valuable insight into the phenomenon that I set out to describe. At the same time, it is acknowledged that my experiences could have also served as a liability, potentially biasing my interpretation of data drawn from participants. I could have, for example, made incorrect assumptions about how a participant responded to an experience based on my own reactions to a similar experience. I may have expected to find that participants had undergone similar educational experiences or had observed dynamics of oppression in the same ways as I have. Perhaps I followed up on certain ideas and not others, steering the conversation toward directions which suited my expectations rather than reflecting the participant’s true experience. To protect against these possibilities, I remained committed to critical self-reflection and consultation with advisors and colleagues throughout the research process (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). I maintained a
reflective research journal in which I articulated and often tried to challenge my own thoughts, feelings, assumptions, and interpretations of both the research content and process. As an example, this entry from July 12, 2011 demonstrates the initially difficult time I had when in attempting to flesh out some of the assumptions contained in my original project proposal:

> It seems so difficult to tease out basic issues like why critical consciousness matters, its connection to mental health, why my definition of it has a liberal slant, and the historical context of Black women’s activism in the U.S. Maybe I’m just being lazy, engaging in procrastination. But I think that it’s more of an issue of not knowing how to elaborate on these things that seem, to me, so obvious and visible. These issues constitute my set of assumptions – of course critical consciousness matters, of course it’s related to mental health, why wouldn’t it be the purview of the liberal left, and everyone knows that Black women have a rich history of activism in the United States! Having to actually drag these things out and explicate them is literally painful for me, because it forces me to think hard about how I “know” these things. I have to question myself. Where’d I get the sense that only progressives are really conscious? What long-held collection of data in my head compels me to see clear relationships between social activism and mental health? Where and when did I learn that it’s important and downright virtuous to be aware of oppression and act against it? And when I think of Black women’s activism, why is it easier for me to just feel that it has always happened than to actually hash out an entire history book of specific names, dates, places, and events? This entire process is like having to unpack a huge old suitcase and explain where and why you originally bought each piece of clothing. It’s overwhelming and my brain hurts. (7/12/11)

I also checked in frequently with participants (both during data collection and analysis) to clarify the intended meanings of any interview data that I found confusing or unclear. By doing this, I hope that I have more accurately reflected participants’ views about critical consciousness and the experiences which have led them to a place of
combined understanding and action. One example of this was with participant Tia, who made a comment that I did not understand during our second interview about the racial dynamics of a musical concert she’d recently attended. My reflection on her comments during the transcription of the interview prompted the following email exchange:

(Laura) During the interview, you mention some questions that you have about Black Wolf, a member of a band that you like. Or rather, you mention some questions that you wonder if Black Wolf asks himself about his role in the band. Some of these questions include ‘Am I being used? Am I just a product, a commodity, or do I have real relationships with people around what I’m trying to create?’ In thinking about these questions, I think about your own role as an artist. I wonder if you ever ask these questions of yourself? Do you think that these are questions most creative people (professional artists, musicians, etc.) ask of themselves?

(Tia) I have asked myself these questions, that's why I thought to ask them of other artists like Black Wolf. I don't want to become anyone’s product or commodity. When I start to feel that way I reexamine what I am doing and why. Since the band I mentioned looks like a commodity and product itself, I mean mostly white people imitating, in my opinion, because I don't feel the soul when I've seen them perform live - classic funk and soul, when the lead white singer who takes up most of the stage can't sing all that well in my opinion, yet they are touring and signed to a label, and have a black man running around the stage like a token who can sing his arse off but acts so disconnected, it makes me wonder, you know?

This email exchange clarified for me what Tia meant by her comment and prevented me from assuming that I simply “knew” the meaning of her statement.

Research method

The primary research questions under examination in this study were: How do participants define critical consciousness? How do they attempt to build and maintain high levels of critical consciousness, and what factors have helped or hindered their critical consciousness development? What impact do participants perceive critical
consciousness to have on their daily lives and efforts toward social change? Morrow (2007) argues that a qualitative approach is ideal in the event that variables of interest are not easily identifiable or have yet to be identified, since it would be very difficult to devise a quantitative instrument in such a case. Certainly this fits the topic of the current study, wherein virtually no empirical research has previously examined the process of critical consciousness development among Black women. It has also been argued that qualitative research is uniquely suited to the study of multicultural populations because it integrates the voices of those typically under-represented in the psychological literature, encourages the researcher to consider participants’ socio-cultural context, and provides better insight into under-studied perspectives (Morrow, Rakhsha, & Castaneda, 2001).

According to the conception of early 20th century philosopher Husserl, the examination of everyday experience requires a stepping back from one’s typical, unreflective immersion in a taken-for-granted existence (Welton, 1999). Husserl proposed a “phenomenological attitude” in which one redirects thoughts away from an unreflective immersion in the world to an examination of how phenomena are subjectively experienced. This reflection on one’s own psychic life constituted Husserl’s original method of phenomenological inquiry. Other philosophers brought diverse interpretations and applications of the phenomenological method (Moran, 2000). Heidegger (1962), for instance, considered phenomenological inquiry an interpretative, rather than purely descriptive, process. He argued that real meaning in one’s experiences could only be found through deciphering those experiences, uncovering the meanings concealed by phenomena’s surface-level appearances, and thus linked phenomenology to
philosophical hermeneutics (the study of the theory and practice of interpretation). Merleau-Ponty (1964) was heavily influenced by both Husserl and Heidegger and was the only phenomenologist of the early 20th century to engage extensively with the field of psychology (Moran, 2000). Each of these thinkers recognized that individuals are embedded in particular historical, social, and cultural contexts which shape their experience of the world (Shinebourne, 2011).

A contemporary form of phenomenological inquiry, known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was developed by British psychologist and health researcher Jonathan Smith (Smith, Jarman, & Osborne, 1999) and is one derivative of the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions promoted by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. IPA is considered a unique research approach due to its combination of psychological, interpretative and idiographic components (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), and was thus employed to address the research questions of the current study.

Like most qualitative approaches, IPA seeks to describe people’s lived experiences in a social context, uncovering the meaning that people make of those experiences and offering a detailed, in-depth view of social phenomena in their natural settings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). IPA is concerned with understanding the world from the viewpoint of participants, but simultaneously embraces the practice of questioning in order to uncover meaning. Thus, what makes IPA phenomenological is that offers rich, experiential descriptions of participants’ worlds; what makes it interpretative is that it recognizes the role of the researcher in “making sense of the participants making sense of themselves” (Smith, 2004, pg. 40). This reflexive stance allows the researcher to be both
empathic toward participants’ worldviews and critically questioning of participants’ accounts (Shinebourne, 2011).

Though it has not previously been used to examine the topic of Black women’s critical consciousness development, IPA has been applied to the examination of women’s experiences of a wide range of issues such as eating disorder progression (Fox, Larkin, & Leung, 2011), and bereavement after the loss of a child (Harper, O’Connor, Dickson, & O’Connor, 2011), as well as to better understand women’s personal conceptualizations of abstract concepts such as “victimhood” (Niel, Mark, & Ian, 2010). IPA has been used with African-Caribbean populations in the United Kingdom to examine the role of mentoring for adolescent boys (Hilary & Nancy, 2010) but has not been used extensively with African American populations. Most frequently, IPA has been utilized in the field of health psychology to examine patients’ experiences of meaning-making and adjustment pertaining to various health conditions including back pain (Dean, Smith, Payne & Weinman, 2005; Osborne & Smith, 2006), spinal cord injury (Dickson, Allan, & O’Carroll, 2008), breast cancer (Bennett, Laidlaw, Dwivedi, Naito, & Gruzelier, 2006), Parkinson’s disease (Bramley & Etough, 2005), chronic fatigue syndrome (Dickson, Knusse, & Flowers, 2007), and heart attack (Hogg, Garrett, Shaw, & Tagney, 2007).

Given the lack of previous phenomenological work on the topic of Black women’s consciousness development, the current study represents a novel approach to the examination of the topic. Furthermore, IPA specifically pursues participants’ reflection upon personal experiences, focuses on the idiographic and particular nature of individual accounts, and encourages detailed examinations of each case before moving to
more general claims (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus, IPA is especially helpful in considering the essential features of a shared yet subjective phenomenon, in this case the critical consciousness development of Black women.

Recruitment procedure

With its idiographic commitment, IPA aims to provide an in-depth description of a phenomenon or experience shared by a small, homogenous sample of individuals. Ideally, this sample ranges from three to six individuals, allowing for a meaningful examination of the richness of each case while also reflecting points of similarity and difference between participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Locating a sample of African-American women who possess a high level of critical consciousness posed its own set of challenges. One’s level of critical consciousness is an attribute that may not readily be identified by another person, and a woman who possesses it may not label it as such. Nonetheless, in order to facilitate the study of Black women’s perceptions of critical consciousness development, it was necessary to operationalize the construct of critical consciousness in such a way that allowed me to determine the parameters of a research sample.

For the current study, I chose to focus on the experience of U.S. Black women who are actively and consciously resisting oppression. This focus on Black women who resist oppression is called for by the very definition of critical consciousness upon which this research was founded. According to this definition, as originally put forth by Freire (1970), critical consciousness involves not only an awareness of social and political contradictions, but some action taken to challenge or address those contradictions.
Therefore, a purposive sampling method was used to identify research participants who demonstrated both an awareness of social forces and a commitment to social action which challenges the oppression caused by those forces.

For the purposes of this study, such a commitment was represented by high levels of involvement in activities designed to challenge oppressive conditions. It has been argued that Black women’s many forms of resistance to oppression are not always recognized under society’s formal definitions of “activism” or “political action,” (Collins, 1990). Popular perceptions of what constitutes ‘activism’ often involve “exaggerated, romanticized, and abstract allusions to tireless commitment, selfless sacrifice, unparalleled devotion, and other conceptions” (Bobel, 2007, pg. 154). Thus, many socially conscious and politically active women might not identify themselves with the term “activist.” Therefore, this study’s recruitment materials employed the term “women who challenge oppression” rather than “activist,” and this criterion could be met through a wide range of behaviors, from involvement in formal protests and social justice movements to the more mundane efforts of consciously challenging systems of domination in everyday life contexts (e.g. school, work, home, church).

As a starting point for recruitment, I contacted women listed in TheRoot.com’s “20 Leading Black Women Social Activists” published in March 2011. The Root.com is a popular news and opinion website specific to African-American issues. The listing of leading women activists, published in honor of Women’s History Month, spotlighted 20 contemporary Black women across the United States judged to be influential in diverse
realms of non-profit and social activism. I contacted all 20 of the women via email with the following recruitment message [also in Appendix A]:

Hello [participant name],

My name is Laura Turner-Essel and I am a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at the University of Akron. I am currently seeking Black women to interview for my dissertation, “Critical Consciousness of Black Women Activists.” Through this study, I will be examining how Black women who challenge oppression (in its various forms) have come to be aware of that oppression and act against it. I was referred to you by [referent] because of your efforts to challenge oppression, most recently in your role as [role]. I would really value having your perspective and experiences included in this study.

Your participation in this project would involve meeting with me for a series of three interviews, with each lasting 1 to 2 hours. These interviews can be conducted either in person or by phone. I would also like to spend some time observing as you engage in anti-oppression efforts for at least two hours, whether this means tagging along as you engage in typical work activities, attending one of your presentations, accompanying you to an event, etc. This is just so that I can put the information you provide in your interview into a larger context and is intended to be as nonintrusive as possible.

If you think that you would be willing and able to be included in this project, please respond to this email and I will provide you with a consent letter that will explain more about the study and allow you to make an informed decision about your participation. Then if you choose to participate, we can arrange our first meeting for whatever time suits your schedule. Please do not hesitate to contact me at [email] or [phone] with any questions or concerns about this project. Thank you for your time and consideration!

Laura Turner-Essel, MA
Doctoral Student
Collaborative Program in Counseling Psychology, University of Akron
[phone]
[email]
Five of the women contacted from this listing originally expressed interest in the study but eventually decided that they could not accommodate the three-interview schedule; one declined right away but provided referrals to three other women activists who agreed to participate. The other 14 women did not respond at all. In addition to contacting women from this list, I used social, political, and educational networks (e.g., cultural and professional associations, local civic organizations, college and university groups) to identify additional participants for the study. From these sources, I identified and sent emails to six women. Three of the six agreed to participate. This participant recruitment strategy is similar to that utilized by Osajima (2007), who examined the critical consciousness development of Asian Americans involved in cultural activism.

Each potential participant was informed as to the nature and purpose of the study and of her rights to decline or terminate participation at any time (Appendix D), provided with a list of potential interview questions (Appendix C), and asked to reflect on whether she felt that she adequately met the provided criteria for participation in the study (Appendix B). These criteria, based on Freire’s (1970) definition of critical consciousness, included a conscious awareness of social forces (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, etc.) and some level of involvement in social action which challenges the oppression caused by those forces.

Research participants

The final group of participants for this study was comprised of six women ranging in age from their late twenties to mid-fifties, based in Northeastern and Midwestern regions of the United States. All of the participants identified as Black women who grew
up in the United States, some self-identified as “activists” and some did not, some worked formally for social justice-related organizations and some did not, some were well-known nationally for their work and others were not. All of the participants endorsed the belief that they recognized forces of oppression and regularly challenged it in their everyday lives. Of the six women who agreed to participate, one asked that her real name not be used in the study. Her data appears under the pseudonym “Kimberly.” Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the study participants.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Attraction</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Social Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kofi</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Detroit, MI</td>
<td>“Christian”</td>
<td>“Same gender”</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Ph.D</td>
<td>“Community organizing, racial, gender expression, LGBT, anti-bullying, LGBT homelessness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>New Haven, CT</td>
<td>“Christian”</td>
<td>“Queer”</td>
<td>In relationship</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>“Racial and economic justice”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Milwaukee, WI</td>
<td>“Iifa”</td>
<td>“Other gender”</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>“Race and gender issues, cultivating humanity and community through yoga, singing, and restorative justice circles”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Milwaukee, WI</td>
<td>“N/A”</td>
<td>“Hetero”</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>“Racial justice”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Akron, OH</td>
<td>“Christian”</td>
<td>“Heterosexual”</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>“Racial justice, economic issues, educational policy, human rights that stem from our God-given rights”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Washington D.C.</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>“Straight”</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Black LGBT rights</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

*Study Participants*
Data collection

With these six participants, I utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews as a primary source of data. Though an interview protocol (see Appendix C) served as a framework for the discussion, questions were open and expansive. The ultimate goal was for the participant to talk at length about her experience of developing critical consciousness. Seidman’s (1998) three interview protocol served as a guide for the content of interviews. Thus, interviews broadly addressed each participant’s life history, experience of critical consciousness development, and reflective dialogue about the meaning of critical consciousness in light of their personal history. Questions more specifically attended to such areas as how the participant became aware of social forces playing a role in her life, what factors and experiences encouraged and/or impeded this awareness, and how such awareness impacts her efforts toward social change. The nature of phenomenological interviewing allowed for much flexibility in my role as the interviewer, such that participants were able to introduce topics that they deemed pertinent to the discussion and follow-up questions could be used to elicit more information.

All initial interviews were conducted in person and were generally completed in the home or workplace of the participant (with the exception of Tia, whose initial interview was conducted in the yoga studio where she attends racial justice meetings and Kimberly, whose initial interview was conducted at a diner down the street from her home). Follow-up interviews were conducted by phone, with the exception of Rita whose interviews were all conducted in person at her home in Akron. Individual interviews
ranged from 7 minutes (to ask a brief follow-up question) to 134 minutes with all participants providing at least 95 minutes of combined interview data, (total interview time=1041 minutes, mean interview length=61 minutes, median =64 minutes). All interviews were completed between June and October 2011, and were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

In addition to conducting interviews, I spent two hours engaged in observation of each research participant. This observation consisted of me “shadowing” the participant through some routine aspect of her social justice work, which allowed me to witness her “in action” within the context of her daily environment. For example, I accompanied Kimberley (the community organizer) on her regular canvassing routine, walking door-to-door with her as she spoke to residents about an upcoming political election. I accompanied Sharon (the executive director of a national Black LGBT advocacy group) to a coalition meeting with leaders of the Veterans’ Administration concerning health care for LGBT veterans. I attended a racial trauma retreat that Yvette (a restorative justice advocate) co-led. During these observations, I participated when necessary but spent much of my time taking detailed notes and observing the individual participants in their element. Such observation experiences allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of how participants might use critical consciousness to navigate the settings and contexts of their daily lives and more specifically, their social justice efforts.

Data analysis

In keeping with an idiographic perspective, each participant’s individual data (interviews and observations) was combined and coded before similarities, differences, or
patterns across participants were explored. Analysis of each data set helped to inform analysis of subsequent data; this allowed me to identify what was new and different from one participant to the next, and also to clearly recognize themes that emerged repeatedly across participants. It also sometimes meant re-reading the data of previous participants to search for instances of a newly emerging theme, and including those instances in the ongoing analysis.

The specific steps of analysis were consistent with those described by Biggerstaff (2008): 1.) identifying categories of meaning by highlighting and isolating recurrent themes and experiences each transcript, 2.) selecting themes which appeared most central to the experiences of participants, 3). relating the identified themes into clusters, and 4).collating participant data and identifying interconnections around the phenomenon of critical consciousness development.

My role throughout data analysis was to make sense of each participant’s understanding of her own experience. I attempted to “bracket” my preconceptions about the process of critical consciousness development while entering the experiential world of each participant. This was accomplished during the initial reading and re-reading of each interview transcript by recording my own initial observations on memo-sheets and in my reflective journal, allowing me to capture my impressions of the transcript while remaining immersed in and engaged with the data. Summaries of the data, paraphrases, associations and connections between different responses, contradictions, and general impressions of the participant were all recorded on memo-sheets or in the margins of the transcript. I pinpointed recurring ideas and language that suggested subtle and complex
themes in the data. I clustered closely-related ideas to create categories of participant experiences. I was then able to examine potential connections between entire categories. As an iterative process, data analysis involved a continuous shift in attention between the participants’ claims about the experience and my interpretations of those claims.

Interview and observation fieldnotes were expanded into descriptive (i.e., chronological narratives of occurrences during interview), analytic (i.e., recordings of reflections, interpretations, questions, patterns), and personal notes (i.e., subjective feelings about interview process and participant) about the data. Along with the interview transcripts, these expanded notes facilitated the development of emergent themes by highlighting tacit patterns and processes that occurred during data collection.

An emergent coding method was utilized to aid in both data reduction and a clearer recognition of ideas present throughout participants’ accounts. Specifically, expanded notes and chunks of interview data were broken into short words and phrases that captured what was happening in the data. Initial coding changed my original understanding of the data, and reviewing the data led back to revisions in my original coding scheme. Thus, analysis involved an iterative approach of review, revision, and re-thinking of interpretations.

The final stage of analysis involved looking for patterns across participants, and any super-ordinate ‘clusters’ of concepts which emerged from the whole of the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). To develop themes, I created concise phrases that I felt captured the essential qualities found throughout the various texts, while moving to a slightly higher level of abstraction than allowed by individual codes. I identified 14
themes which highlighted the essential elements of participants’ critical consciousness development, and organized them into three super-ordinate clusters based on the research questions.

Interestingly, I also identified one participant- Tia- whose themes were often markedly at odds with most of the other participants. In many ways, her story was dissonant, not fitting the emerging picture of how critical consciousness is fostered. Only after re-reading all data to make sure that I had not misunderstood or missed key factors did I allow her experience to posit a “counter-case,” an example of a Black woman whose critical consciousness followed a divergent trajectory than that of the other five participants (Biggerstaff, 2008).

Trustworthiness, reflexivity, and representation

Traditionally, the concepts of reliability and validity have been used to assess the quality of quantitative research in the field of psychology. Reliability is described as the extent to which a study’s findings can be replicated, whereas validity refers to the extent to which these findings can be considered true (Merrick, 1990). Several proponents of qualitative research (Becker, 1996; Lather, 1993; Wolcott, 1990) have argued that such concepts are not appropriate when discussing qualitative work due to the difference in underlying paradigms.

The current study is anchored in constructivist-interpretative and critical-ideological paradigms, which influence the underlying ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (relationship between researcher and participant in the pursuit of knowledge), axiology (role of values in the research), rhetorical structure (language used
to present the research findings), and methodology (specific procedures used) of the study (Ponterotto, 2010). Within these paradigms, research is seen as unique, personal, and highly changeable and thus, not capable of being replicated with different samples. Furthermore, these paradigms do not concern themselves with establishing the “truth” so much as they attempt to uncover participants’ understandings of a phenomenon (Willis, 2007). However, Merrick (1990) argues that the concepts of reliability and validity are not entirely irrelevant but should be thought of instead as issues of trustworthiness, reflexivity, and representation.

Trustworthiness refers to the credibility of the research process and findings (i.e., can they be believed?) To achieve trustworthiness, I followed the recommendations of Stiles (1993) to disclose my critical theoretical orientation to participants and readers, immerse myself into prolonged engagement with the research material, provide “thick” (detailed) descriptions within my interview fieldnotes, ground higher-level interpretations in actual examples from the data, and discuss my findings with others (dissertation committee members and/or peers) throughout the process. I also maintained an audit trail, a transparent description of research steps taken throughout the investigation that allows interested readers to trace my interpretation processes from the data to the final write-up. These steps were taken in order to make the research process and its influences “conscious to the researcher and visible to readers” (Merrick, 1990, pg. 31).

Reflexivity in qualitative research aims to acknowledge the central role of the researcher in the construction of knowledge. To achieve a high degree of reflexivity, I regularly (in my thought and writing) acknowledged how my personal values and
interests were shaping the research process, critically examined the research process itself to reveal its assumptions and biases, and reflected on larger issues such as research methodology and the field of psychology itself (Wilkinson, 1988).

As an example, this entry from my researcher journal was entered after a phone conversation with participant Tia:

“…Another interesting thing that happened during our conversation was that she described a recent incident in which she ‘stood up’ to oppression and felt defeated. In short, she attempted to advocate for a Black boy who was being harassed by police officers. She ended up feeling rebuffed by both the cops and the boy, so she gave up and left the scene. Later she found out that the officers did indeed take the boy and place them in their squad car before “dumping” him on a different side of town. With this I wonder, does activism, by definition, imply a more proactive stance, or do reactionary behaviors (challenging oppression only when it is happening in front of us) also count as activism? And what about activists who “give up” when it gets hard?

Bobel (2007) says we shouldn’t romanticize or idealize activists as people who never burn out, never get tired, and never drop the ball. But for the purposes of this study, where do I draw the line? How much does a woman need to consciously challenge oppression in order to be deemed “critically conscious?” This is such a troubling question for me to still have at this point in the process!

The common definition of activism, from Merriam-Webster (2012): ‘Activism consists of intentional efforts to bring about social, political, or economic change. Activism can take a wide range of forms from writing letters to newspapers or politicians, political campaigning, economic activism such as boycotts or preferentially patronizing businesses, rallies, street marches, strikes, sit-ins, and hunger strikes.’

But if I go by this definition, doesn’t that take me back to Collins’ point that Black women’s activism is under-recognized because of a limited definition? On the other hand, does just anything count as activism? Maybe I really shouldn’t use that word. The phrase “women who challenge oppression” is indeed a safer term, less likely to evoke specific definitions and
connotations. But I still should be clear on what exactly constitutes a ‘challenge’ to oppression.” (7/4/11)

This entry following entry was made after scheduling my first interview with participant Sharon:

“…Seidman (1998, pg. 89) notes that ‘elites are often accustomed to being in charge of situations in which they find themselves and may attempt to take charge of interviews in both verbal and nonverbal ways.’ This may include developing extremely busy schedules just as the interview time approaches, or redirecting research questions to be more in line with what s/he would like to talk about. In Seidman’s view, this creates a dilemma for the researcher in that she must walk a narrow line between asking the in-depth questions in which she is interested (and which often put the participant in a state of vulnerability) and recognizing that such questions may lead to an abrupt termination of the interview.

I am becoming concerned that a similar dynamic may play out with my DC participant, the director of a very large advocacy organization. As stated in my last entry, I have been back and forth with her assistant (never with her directly) concerning scheduling. I am now beginning to find myself somewhat resentful that the time she has chosen conflicts with a conference presentation that I was already scheduled to attend. Of course completing the dissertation interviews takes priority, and I am grateful to have this participant in the study, but I feel somewhat controlled by her last-minute scheduling decisions. This does not feel like the best place from which to start our researcher-participant relationship.

I’ve attempted to reschedule to no avail, so I will approach the interview openly knowing that it is worth it. But I do hope that she will also be open and forthcoming during this process, and I hope I’ve made that very clear.” (7/25/11)

Representation refers to the way that data, and especially participants’ voices, are included and presented throughout the writing process. The task here is for the researcher to “elucidate the experience that is implicated by the subjects in the context of their activities as they perform them, and as they are understood by the [researcher]” (Altheide
& Johnson, 1994, pg. 491). Thus, I use quotes from participants to support any conclusions that are drawn in my analysis, and I acknowledge my role in listening to and co-authoring (through my questions, probes, and follow-ups) the information presented by research participants.

**Ethical considerations**

One ethical issue to be considered with such qualitative inquiry is the nature of the informed consent process. Unlike with structured interviews or measures designed for quantitative investigations, the emergent nature of phenomenological interviewing implies that new directions for inquiry may be discovered as interviews unfold. Thus, neither researcher nor participant can ever really know where personal interviews may lead (Ponterotto, 2010). Clearly, this complicates the issue of informing participants about the content of the interview and their potential reactions to the topics which come forth. Still, every effort was made to inform potential participants as to the general scope of the study, and each participant was provided with a copy of the semi-structured interview protocol. Written consent was gained from each participant prior to data collection, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time throughout the data collection process. Participants were also provided with proof of the study’s IRB approval at the outset of the initial interview.

All research materials, including transcriptions, informed consent letters, and fieldnotes were dated, paginated, and reference coded. Participant confidentiality was protected by the secure storage of these materials, along with interview recordings, in a locked storage bin in the home of the researcher. Flash drives used to hold participant
data were encrypted and password-protected, and no participant data was stored directly on computer hard drives. In addition, all participants were asked to review transcriptions of their interview data, and allowed to edit or clarify specific comments. Each participant was also invited to provide feedback on my interpretations of emergent themes after her individual interview had been analyzed and before the final write-up of the study. This “member-check” was intended to maintain both the rigor and trustworthiness of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Another ethical consideration in this study is that in attempting to engage a community of women who may possess initial mistrust of an “ivory tower” researcher (Ponterotto, 2010), I was careful to establish trust with participants. This involved keeping in contact with participants for a significant period of time following data collection (through email or phone) so that I was not perceived to have “taken the data and run.” It also involved discussing with participants the study’s potential benefits to Black women, their various causes, and the community as a whole. Participants were, to my surprise, excited to engage in the process of self-reflection and most expressed a belief that the study would be important and much-needed in the field.

Limitations of the study

As a qualitative researcher, I acknowledge that my subjective experiences, values and assumptions influenced my decisions as to who would included in this study, and which criteria were used to operationalize the construct of critical consciousness. With much deliberation, I chose the aforementioned criteria in an effort to offer a practical yet in-depth exploration of a particular experience in a particular sample of people. The
chosen sample certainly does not represent all potential participants, but hopefully provides valuable insight into the topic at hand and serves as a useful foundation for future research in this area.

Another limitation of this study is that like all qualitative research, the data collected here is not intended to determination causality. Though the findings may suggest that particular experiences are related to the development of critical consciousness, it is impossible with the small sample size and non-experimental research approach to conclude that specific factors, processes, and/or individual characteristics invariably lead to high (or low) levels of critical consciousness.

Finally, this study relies on self-report and thus is by its very nature subject to the confines of participants’ memory, openness, and honesty. However, because the focus is on participants’ meanings and interpretations, rather than some objective measure of experience, I contend that this study’s findings are quite meaningful despite the natural complexity of any effort to report on one’s own thoughts, feelings, and behavior.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

This study explored the process of critical consciousness development among a sample of U.S. Black women who challenge oppression in various ways. The purpose of this study was to elicit these women’s perceptions of the conditions, influences, processes, and experiences that contributed to their conscientization. This chapter will review the findings of in-depth interviews and observations with the six women who participated in this study.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, 14 themes and 4 sub-themes were identified within participants’ experiences of critical consciousness development. These themes clustered together under three broader concepts, related to the study’s research questions: “Definitions of critical consciousness,” “Factors in building and maintaining critical consciousness,” and “Impact of critical consciousness on daily lives and social change efforts.” Table 2 provides an overview of these clusters and their accompanying themes. As part of my analysis, I compiled a directory of participants’ phrases that supported each theme, and these extracts are used to exemplify themes in the following section.
Table 2

*Clusters and Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Critical Consciousness</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cyclical/Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors in Building/Maintaining Consciousness</td>
<td>Societal Changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience and Awareness of Oppression</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Characteristics and Struggles</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religion/Spirituality/Morality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passion/Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Consciousness of Daily Life/Change Efforts</td>
<td>Ways of Manifesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Dialogue/listening/relating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Questioning/encouraging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Direct Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vigilance/Constant Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility/Obligation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anger/Frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations of the Work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How did participants define critical consciousness?

Each participant was asked to describe what the term “critical consciousness” meant to her. Some common ideas emerged from participants’ conceptualizations of the construct.

Awareness

Kofi described critical consciousness as “the ability to critically analyze things beyond what we see.” Kimberly stated that it is “the process of actively asking questions, challenging assumptions, destabilizing systems of knowledge or systems of power in order to make them action-able and something that can be mobilized around.” Sharon described it as an awareness of all the dynamics involved in her work within various communities. This theme of awareness was echoed by Tia, who described critical consciousness as “Being aware of how your actions impact those around you, and even your thoughts.” Yvette articulated it as “a state that makes us more open to…the truth of the elements that are at play all around us, right now.”

Cyclical/Ongoing

Participants frequently described the development of critical consciousness as a cyclical or ongoing process, and no one described themselves as being “finished” with this progression. Thus, participants generally felt that critical consciousness was an indefinite process of building awareness. Kimberly extended this point even further, claiming that critical consciousness is a process that must be engaged both continuously and collectively (in relationship with other people).

“I think that maybe this process of critical consciousness is an ongoing one that is often cyclical, and it has to be collective.
I think just through my conversations, my interaction, my connection with other human beings that I am clear about how things work, how things are broken, and we can actually build a shared vision of what could be. This current drive that I’m on, when you go into the neighborhoods that we’re going into today and talk to people about what is actually happening, and then you have a conversation with them, I’ve never been clearer about how power works in this city than when I go do that.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

Uniquely, Rita shared that although she is used to hearing the term (“consciousness”) used frequently in her work with various community groups, she feels there is no common definition and she is still formulating one of her own.

“That’s a word that I hear so much when I go to our meetings, when I deal with Kwanzaa, when I read books by authors who have dealt with this subject. Maulana Karenga, and so many others. I think it’s a term that Black people really need to explore because it means different things to different people…I’ve kind of taken on what I’ve heard others say it’s supposed to be. I’m still formulating what it does mean to me. I think the word has a history, when you talk about the founders of Afrocentric education, when you talk about Pan-African studies and the Pan-African movement. I think it has a special context when you talk about Malcolm X. It has a context when you talk about Elijah Muhammad. So I think there are so many aspects that come to people’s minds when you say ‘consciousness.’ For me, I have looked at all of the terms and ideas that go with the best of Black people. All the things that speak to our history in Africa, all the things that speak to our beginnings in this country. I have tried to formulate a philosophy where I embrace whatever the most uplifting ideologies, the most uplifting definitions, the most uplifting experiences that have sustained Black people.” (Rita, Interview 2)

However, Rita was also very adamant in stating that critical consciousness must have a practical application; it “has to be about the uplift and forward movement of our people and it has to be something that’s serving our daily lives.” (Interview 2)
What were factors in building and maintaining critical consciousness?

Participants described some common experiences and life circumstances which they viewed as facilitating their early development of critical consciousness, as well as helping to maintain it on a daily basis.

**Societal Changes**

Several participants cited the social changes taking place during their formative years as important factors in the development of their critical consciousness. This was especially true for two participants who were children during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

“As I moved into middle school, the topic became more specific in terms of the Civil Rights Movement, because now we’re moving into the ’60s. So the discussion is on the table for real, in terms of marches and in terms of riots in the streets…I remember the rioting. I remember fire-bombing…The music for the nation was James Brown singing ‘I’m Black and I’m proud, say it loud.’ Everybody was singing that across the nation. That penetrated because you saw on TV, you were seeing on the news people marching on the street, Rap Brown was going on, Nikki Giovanni. So all around you was this swirling culture of ‘It’s good to be Black, and it’s good to show it with the way you live. Show it with your afro, show it with your dashiki, how it in your singing, show it in your food, show it in your everyday life.” (Rita, Interview 1)

“…Politics were changing in Detroit, the leaders in government went from being mostly White, White mayors and White governors and all that, to Black mayors…And I witnessed a lot of that, because I lived in Detroit and it was quickly becoming predominantly Black I got exposed to Black people in leadership in government at a young age. I saw that transition happen. I saw the White people moving out when my family and other Black people were moving in. Saw that happen, saw the school system change….When it was starting to become predominantly Black, the houses started to go
down, the quality of the education started to go down. They started taking out music and taking out art, and AP classes out of the school system. And so when you witness changes like that, how can you not want to be motivated and driven to do something about it?” (Kofi, Interview 2)

Sharon, who grew up in Miami during the time that Cuban immigrants had gained substantial political and economic power in the region, named this contextual factor as an important influence in her early sociopolitical development.

“There was a time in Miami when Cubans came over and there was a big stand-down between the Cubans and the Haitians, in the early ‘80s. Everything became Cuban, Cuban, Cuban. [My mother] was treated terribly. She lost her job. I heard her say ‘We should have never left New York.’ Miami was way behind on so many issues of integration and democracy, and it was just a have and have not city. She got marginalized through her job, which was discrimination… But when I went off to college I learned about that particular bank and their discrimination against Black people. I became really curious. I started learning about democracy in a different way.” (Sharon, Interview 1)

She also cited more recent cultural shifts regarding heterosexist comments by Black celebrities as energizing her current LGBT advocacy work.

“It’s culture change. It is the same magnitude when we had to stop calling disabled people retarded. The political correctness has not set in for our community because of lack of consequence. But with consequences for Tracey Morgan and Kobe Bryant for using flagrant negative stereotypes of our community, people are now being sanctioned with financial penalties. There’s one part of saying ‘Be careful, the gays will get you.’ It’s another consequence having to change your behavior. So right now we’re stuck in that Pandora’s box, slowly migrating to consequence.” (Sharon, Interview 2)

And Yvette, who stated that she “came to life” five years ago at age 41, named President Obama’s 2008 race speech as a motivational factor in her racial justice work.
“It was around the time Obama gave that phenomenal speech about race. He said ‘talk about race.’ So we’re like, ‘Let’s talk about it! We got something to say about this!’ ”
(Yvette, Interview 1)

Experience and awareness of oppression

All participants recalled at least one experience of oppression, typically in the form of discrimination or exclusion, that they experienced personally or witnessed firsthand during their childhood years.

“I was in 4-H. I think I was like 8 years old. My mom worked but we lived in this neighborhood where a lot of moms didn’t work. I think I had my first bout of oppression, because I was a chubby kid. I was getting marginalized first, I think, class-wise. We had moved out to the suburbs….I kept running for treasurer, or secretary. There were only six of us in this camp. I’m like, ‘Can I get a chance?’ It was overt enough that I went home so upset…for somebody to deny me any of my rights, I didn’t know how to do anything else but fight for my rights. Like, ‘Mom, you gotta get here. This woman thinks I am not worthy to serve in a leadership role. Back then, I wasn’t that confident about being denied something because it never really happened to me before then.” (Sharon, Interview 1)

“My mother got promoted so we [participant and her twin sister] moved from St. Leo’s to St. Nicholas. To a better area, a better school, predominantly White and it felt White….I was not surrounded by people of color that looked like me. They split us up. They also did not test us. They just automatically put is in the lowest math group and the lowest reading group…In 5th grade, another set of twins came in that were White. They put them in the same classroom, they tested them, they placed them in their reading and math groups. As we got all the way through to the 8th grade, I was in the second highest reading group and the highest math group. Because we were capable, we were smart. But I got all the way to the 8th grade and had never heard of a fraction. Why? Because I got skipped around. When you get skipped, you miss something. The teacher looks at me and she’s like,
‘You don’t know fractions?’ Now I’m ashamed. I go crying home to my mom.” (Yvette, Interview 1)

For some of the participants, internal oppression (discrimination and rejection enacted by one’s own group) was the most prevalent and painful form of oppression experienced.

“Kids were calling me names like this, and like ‘Dang, I didn’t do anything. All I’m doing is being me. And this is what I was exposed to, so what do you expect?’ And the irony of it all is, and I think about this a lot, I thought it was the Black community that fought all these years for the right to have an education, who wanted their kids to go to college and do better for themselves and be successful and become doctors and all this kind of stuff. And they didn’t do it… It was ironic. ‘You think you’re this, and you think you’re that, and you think you’re elite,’ and that kind of crap.” (Kofi, Interview 1)

“They had a Black Student Union that I tried to be involved in. It was so hard. It was so hard for me to really fit in there…There was this distance between me and other people my own race. Because I wasn’t Black enough for the Black people, teased and pushed aside and stuff like that. But yet I have the being ignored by White people thing going on. I felt very stuck and didn’t know how to reach out.” (Tia, Interview 1)

When participants could not recall specific incidents of blatant oppression, they described having had a general sense of having less opportunity or receiving less respect than their peers based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and even weight.

“I guess I’d say it was exclusion, it was alienation, it was I felt like the choices that I had in front of me were predetermined by some other, and they were different than the choices in front of other people and whether that had to do with how much cash they had, or other opportunities, but
like they had privileges, whatever. It just felt to me like exclusion, like alienation.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“But I did know in my heart, we weren’t being treated the same. We came out of middle school and started going into high school, there did seem to be this difference. I think the White kids were starting to know. They were not saying it, but it was being set from their homes, from their parents, that we should not be on the same level. So it was in the air. You really couldn’t pinpoint it. First of all, most of the Whites had gone. There weren’t a lot. By the time I got to [high school], it was really changing.” (RR:1:7)

Experiences with oppression clearly did not stop at childhood, and the women were not always able to recognize or effectively handle them as forms of oppression, even as adults.

“One of my best friends, beautiful woman, became the vice president of my company… and this person that I actually admired in University relations told her, ‘Why don’t you become the face of [the company]? You know, Sharon doesn’t have the presence that you have.’ Mind you, I’m the president and CEO of my own company. My name is on the building. You work this hard all your life, and somebody just pulls the air out of you. They said, ‘She’s too obese to the face of her own company.’….My college roommate got a BMW when we were juniors in college. She was like, ‘Oh I’m not sure if I want Sharon riding in my car, because of the shocks.’ Then I’ll never forget we were on a plane….And this man got up and started raising hell on the plane that I cannot sit in the exit row; he said I was too big. So I’ve had all of these experiences, for over 10 years, that my spirit started getting beat down. I didn’t stop executing. It was very internal.” (Sharon, Interview 1)

“I worked initially for a telephone company and I had a very oppressive boss. He sat me down on the first day of the job and told me he had just promoted a young man. He showed me a picture of him, a White male, and said ‘We had such good rapport he called me Master.’ That was day one. I was still in my own way, wide-eyed and trying to figure it
out. It got really bad, to a point that I couldn’t even discern things that weren’t normal for a boss to do. It all felt oppressive. I couldn’t figure out what was normal and wasn’t normal for a boss to be checking up on. Like coming back from the dentist and he wanted to check my teeth.” (Yvette, Interview 1)

These personal experiences of oppression provided some grounding for later understanding, and contributed to the strong sense of purpose and passion with which many of the women became involved in anti-oppression work. In contrast, Tia stated that she never viewed herself as experiencing oppression. She described an internalization of the rejection that she faced during her earlier years. Interestingly, Tia also later expressed a lack of motivation to be actively engaged in challenging oppression right now.

“…at the time I didn’t realize just how much racism and oppression I was really immersed in. I didn’t really see it. What I noticed was that I was often overlooked or ignored, and I always thought it was just me. Just because of how I am. Through high school, through college, I always thought it was just a function of my creative personality, my introvertedness, the way that I think, I didn’t think like a lot of people. So the few friends that I made, I stuck to. Like ‘Okay, we’ve got something in common.’ And they were usually White…I’m just becoming more aware recently…‘Cause going through college, I was aware of stuff going on but I hadn’t personally experienced a whole lot. My experience was of always being ignored and being talked over and just thinking, ‘Oh, that’s just ‘cause I’m shy.’ And feeling like it’s isolated because it’s just what I get because I’m shy.” (Tia, Interview 1)

Participants are conscious of the fact that they still experience oppression in their daily lives. In its most visible form, this oppression often consists of them being asked to deny some aspect of themselves or their identities, being slighted or overlooked, and
having their work disrespected and/or ignored. Participants also describe facing oppression specifically related to their decisions to challenge injustice; others attempt to undermine or suppress their social change efforts. Yet for many of the women, such experiences simply fortify their resolve to fight unjust systems.

“I do feel some limitation. I mean, when I go to work, even though I’m out as a lesbian, and I’m out as a masculine woman, I don’t wear suit and tie to work. Although I would like to! But I don’t. I have to draw a line…I think it’s very oppressive. Maybe not an act of oppression, but it’s systemic oppression, in a way. It’s set up, the society, the gender norms, it’s set up in the culture already, automatically, to keep me and others from having the freedom that the majority has, or all those in power have.” (Kofi, Interview 2)

“So here I am an employee of [public school system], criticizing my employers. So years ago they started pulling my coattail saying, ‘You know you need a job.’ These are my friends and co-workers. ‘You cannot walk around criticizing your boss and the system. You can’t walk around orchestrating marches. You cannot grab the microphone and be on the front page of the [local newspaper] saying that your school’s been discriminated against.’ Well, I haven’t told any lies, so my [African] name says I’m a risk taker. So here I am. I’m just going to have to trust that if they do hold it against me, somebody else will have mercy on me. So I have fallen into that reputation.” (Rita, Interview 3)

“So for me personally at this point in my life, [oppression] is more like disrespect. Like institutional disrespect or devaluing the work that I and my colleagues are doing. Just the stories that you hear if you ask anybody who is not a rich White man on this campus is just like, it’s just another ‘Oh, for real? It’s like that?’ It’s not a shock if you understand intellectually that this place is not for you, when you actually make sense of that. It’s really just disrespect. That said, I have these experiences and I hold on to them. And I remember to make sure that I have some personal stake in whatever fights I take on.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)
“I can see it still is risky. My grandchildren might not know their grandmother if I get too loudmouthed about this. The system is still set up so that it kills off people who challenge it. It does its best. And anybody who’s trying to cede or disconnect from this capitalist structure, they will try every way that they can to break you down. But if I had to decide a good way to die, that would be it.” (Yvette, Interview 1)

As a counterpoint, part of the women’s critical consciousness was also their awareness of their own position in the system, with the majority of participants acknowledging at least one area in which they enjoy some relative privilege (class, attraction orientation, physical appearance, etc.). Participants described using their own experiences of being oppressed to identify and empathize with those over whom they have privilege. In turn, relating to the less privileged further increases participants’ awareness and commitment to challenge oppression (critical consciousness). They attempt to use their privilege to further causes of social justice. Both organizer Kimberly and LGBT advocate Sharon stated that they attempt to “own” their privilege - acknowledging it, utilizing it to level for the playing field, but remaining careful not to impose their agendas upon the less privileged simply because they can. The co-existence of oppressed and privileged identities within participants highlights the complex intersectionality of Black women’s identities, and suggests that having multiple vantage points aids in more fully comprehending the workings of a social system.

“I have to think about my privileges too, because I’m privileged in a lot of different ways. I have my skin privilege, for example. Being able-bodied, that kind of stuff. Am I consciously and intentionally oppressing another person, a disabled person? Or am I keeping disabled people from having the same things that I have? For me, it’s being an ally and developing my ally identity with trans people, with people who
are disabled and in places that don’t have the privilege that I have, that’s making things more visible...because from my being in that position of being oppressed, I know what that’s like...I have to empathize to be in their shoes and wonder what they’re going through. I don’t go through half the things that they go through.” (Kofi, Interview 3)

“So by and large, in this context, inasmuch as [college town] is a microcosm or one iteration of a more macro problem, my problems are not that bad. I understand how they are a piece of a systemic problem and it is a common cause often, that makes my Black experience what it is, that makes other people’s experience what it is. But on balance, my life’s not that tough. I am broke, yes. I can’t get teaching, right. That is the same as people who can’t get work. So I make sure that as I’m digesting and responding to my personal harm, and success and positive experiences too, that I’m doing that with other people. And with other people I create room for them to talk about what they’re going through and their experiences, so I have that whole picture.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“I’ve very conscious of being defined by characteristics other than what you should be judged by... When I lost weight, I got access a lot of times because of my physical appearance. I’ve had it both ways... My entire world changed. And it was not just the way I was on everybody’s ‘A’ list, it was the attention from men, the attention from people that knew me forever. And everything was about my looks and my figure, and my waist got really small. I was offered book deals. I was like, ‘Are you kidding me? You weren’t that nice to me before.’ I decided at that point I’d use it as a weapon to help anybody else that was oppressed for being different.” (Sharon, Interview 1)

Relationships

For all participants, early relationships were a crucial factor in the development of critical consciousness. Connections to specific teachers, peers, family, other role models, communities, and organizations often served as the gateway to sociopolitical awareness.
and provided exposure to ideas and interpretations that participants may have never
developed on their own.

Parents were powerful role models for becoming civically active, and remaining
aware of larger social and political occurrences.

“…my parents kind of paved the way, were role models for me to think. I mean, at the dinner table they’d have these conversations about politics and the state of the world, state of the city, state of government. And I was little but they had these conversations. I was always aware of them. As I got older I started to understand and to comprehend more of it…My mother was very black conscious. My dad ran for city council. They were aware of what was going on politically, and they knew the racial politics that were going on so I was exposed at an early age. And because they had education, they wanted to be aware and they read the newspapers and they kept themselves watching the news and stuff like that. And it mattered to them, it mattered. It mattered to them a lot, and they were able to teach us how important it was and how to value education. (Kofi, Interview 1)

Mothers were especially notable for the loving, caring role they played in the lives of their daughters. Yet they were also models for behaving assertively in the face of discrimination. Through simultaneously nurturing, protecting, and boldly defending their daughters, many of these mothers set the stage for participants’ developing consciousness.

“My mother had a really good motto that I reflect on a lot. At the end of the day it was just this magnanimous, expanding love model that she was on all the time. She read the paper religiously every day, and would get so upset by the things in the world and make these exclamations about ‘Why are people so mean?’ You know, make these proclamations about how the world need to be organized around love and kindness and these kinds of things. She was a really nice lady like that. So I grew up with that narrative about how to be.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)
“I had the advantage of a [mother] that never believed in the word ‘can’t,’ and it really instilled that fire in me of being proud of who I am and proud of what I bring to the table…[after the 4-H incident], I saw my mother react, and she took a day off of work. She had two jobs at the time, but she took a day off from work because she saw me in distress. She came in and said, ‘Look, my child deserves a chance.’…My mother took a day off and she went in there and just wrecked the other moms. I was like, ‘I want to be like that.’ My mom was always my hero because she always made a big deal out of nothing. Everything was a big deal…if I brought it to her attention that there was injustice, then she was going to do something about it. In the smallest ways, as a child that means everything. It was just the fact that she heard me and she took action. There was no consequence for her like, ‘They won’t like you.’ She was like, ‘They’re gonna respect you and they’re gonna fix this.’… I did believe in my mother’s example and learned how to be definitely non-violent but a defender because she always defended. I have a sharp tongue to this day.” (Sharon, Interview 1)

“So I’m bringing all these A papers home all the time. We get my first report card for fifth grade, and I have a C in everything. So my mother goes, ‘Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Wait a minute.’ She goes up to the school and she says, ‘Something’s very wrong. Rita brings home A’s and she has a C on her report card.’ And he says, ‘You’re right. She’s an A student. But this class is graded on a curve, so she gets C’s.’ So my mother says, ‘Well then, I want her out of this class today.’ And Monday I went to a new class.” (Rita, Interview 1)

“My mom was very active in the school, ‘cause she knew that kids got treated better if you were active in school. So she was on the PTA, and all this. I had no idea, but they treated us well because she was involved at the school.” (Yvette, Interview 1)

The one participant for whom this did not seem to ring true was Tia. Uniquely, Tia described having no real role models for critical consciousness until she was 15 years old and met Yvette, who began to take on the role of “godmother” and mentor. Now in
her early 30s, Tia credits much of her relatively recent critical consciousness development to Yvette, who is actively engaged in racial and restorative justice work. Yvette regularly helps Tia become more aware of oppressive dynamics in daily social and political contexts. Tia finds this relationship even more helpful than the one she maintains with her mother, who discouraged Tia from political involvement growing up but now studies politics as part of her graduate program.

“…I met Yvette when I was fifteen and she became a really close mentor… Talking with Yvette was a healing process… I would talk to her about anything and just having that outlet. All I needed was to just be seen…here I have a safe space to really open up and be seen, and suddenly I’m not such a bad person after all…. Yvette was taking yoga classes here. So I started taking yoga classes here, and that’s how I learned about the salons. That began that journey into a whole other awareness that I hadn’t really expected…. It started with the salons. I went to the one on race… Over the course of the next year or so, I was really starting to believe that White privilege is real, the whole capitalism thing… So there were these terms that I learned, learned how they really connected to real life. Terms like white privilege, and capitalism, and other things that I started to see. Became familiar with them, and there were ways where I started to feel like I was more connected to the humanity of it all.” (Tia, Interview 1)

“… there was this whole way we were raised in our church. We didn’t really vote, we couldn’t be political and all that stuff. ‘Cause God takes care of who’s going to win the election. None of that’s really of importance anyway because we’re all trying to get to the Kingdom or whatever… I was not into politics, I couldn’t even tell you A from B, up from down…. My mom has gone to school and studied a lot of this stuff. In the last five years, she’s gone back to grad school. Now she’s graduating with her doctorate from a social justice school. So it’s weird ‘cause while I was here getting this, she was studying it academically, where I was getting it informally. But for some reason I never felt the need to go call on her because I had Yvette right here in the city. My mom lives an hour and a half away. I only see her twice a month. She just has
a different way of, I don’t know. She just doesn’t approach it the same as Yvette does. The experiences are real for her, but she’s not actively doing anything. She’s, like, studying it. I’ll ask her questions or send articles to her that might be interesting.” (Tia, Interview 1)

Other family members, such as grandparents and siblings, were also able to exert influence on most participants’ development through their own passionate involvement in various social justice causes.

“…I remember my grandfather used to wear this pin on his lapel all the time that said ‘Prayer is the answer. NAACP.’ I didn’t really know what was up with that until he was dead but as it turns out he was a field organizer for the NAACP for many years. As I got older I would ask about it. My grandmother had all these stories about how he would organize across the state…It was these hotels with the Klan chasing them, and all this stuff…And my father had some stories when she was pressed on it about Medgar Evers coming to his house. So he was doing work that I didn’t really know because he was quite ill when I was a kid. So even as my dad’s side of the family comes off as bourgeois at times, that same grandfather was editor of the Atlanta Daily World for several years.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“My mother remarried this man who had a daughter who was three years older than me…She was a member of the Black Panther Party and she would always come home really excited about the meetings. She told me about the Panthers and she had me memorize the Black Panther platform, by heart. And I would repeat it by heart and recite it. That was kind of fun. I guess her heart was really in it and her passion was really in it…and my stepsister was very articulate when talking about some of the concepts of oppression. I mean, I was really new at this, and it was very enlightening, it really opened my eyes.” (Kofi, Interview 1)

For most of the participants, peers were and continue to be a big support and influence throughout various aspects of their lives and work. Like-minded peers provide information, support, and camaraderie as the women continually increase their awareness
and journey further into activism. With such peers, the women are able to form organizations and networks for a protective sense of community.

“We did seven days of Kwanzaa, just us students, you know. And we had the Kwanzaas at each others’ houses, and we studied the principles, seven principles, what they were about. We had people in the club who really, like, they were really into Blackness and Black identity and Black consciousness and learning our history and finding out the truth about where our people came from…So it was this group of us, our peer group, that we kind of fed each other information. You know we engaged in that kind of study…So, so we still have that spirit of camaraderie as people who were in the study club. Those of us who stay in touch with each other, we still have that bond.” (Kofi, Interview 1)

“So we’re discussing how we can retaliate, how we should take things into our own hands, all my classmates were talking about marching. And now we’re starting to connect things in our private lives and the classroom. And I remember there started to be finger-pointing at certain teachers, certain staff members. You know, who’s racist, who doesn’t like Black people…we’re working our necks for real because we have a sense of who’s being discriminated against right in front of us….I remember us formulating marches.” (Rita, Interview 1)

“When I got here, some Black women who were upper year graduate students in my department approached me and asked me to join the Union. I didn’t know what they were talking about. But they put it to me like this, they said ‘The union is the only space you’re gonna find on campus where people are actually raising critical questions about the work that we’re doing and what it’s for.’ So I was like, ‘Okay, that sounds good.’ ”(Kimberly, Interview 1)

The community, whether in the sense of peers or a broader network of meaningful connections, also serves to pull participants out of their own personal experiences and into a larger, shared group experience. Participants mentioned this factor as being crucial to the maintenance of critical consciousness.
“One of the ways I talk about is that what organizers do for each other, what organizing is, is serving as a bank, a storage place for another person’s hopes and dreams and vision…As an organizer, you hold what people said to you in this safe space when they’re not being pressed up on every side or they’re not being knocked around or whatever. You hold that. And then when life gets really hard and people are losing it, you just give it back to them. You just tell them back what they said, you tell them back what they have visioned and hoped for. And that is what we do for each other and that’s how we get through the next step. When I have had people do that for me, I’m just like, ‘Oh, right. I do remember what I believe in. I do remember what I dreamt. I’m just mad, that’s why I’m saying why I’m saying right now. I’m just mad, or I’m hurt, or I’m scared, or I’m whatever. But I do remember, I do have this.’ …You need somebody to be like, ‘I got you.’ Because yeah, it gets hard to remember when you’re in your own head like that and you’re in your own experience.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“I appreciate having a space of working with my husband and having someone that I can actually talk it over with. Interacting with people and recognizing various levels being reflected back to me of asleepness, or being attuned, or internalized oppression waking up and being spewed…I need help to see those parts of where I’m not tuning in to all the elements that are really at play. I’ll ask for feedback…‘Cause when I’m in it, I’m just in it. We’re all just in it… But that’s okay. That’s why we have each other. That’s the value…We can be there for each other. And I do trust the circle to uphold that for me and for other people. And it’s been very helpful.” (Yvette, Interview 2)

Indeed, the importance of such community ties became evident during many of my observations of participants. For instance, while attending the “Healing Racial Harm” retreat organized by Yvette and her racial justice group, I was able to witness the support and affirmation that she obtained from both her husband and fellow racial justice activists. This support provided a safe space for her to reflect upon the painful reality of
racial oppression, and connect her experience to that of others. Similarly, Kofi co-led a
discussion at a national media conference entitled “Generations of Black Lesbian
Brilliance.” Her co-leader was a peer from the Black lesbian community in Detroit, and
the two emphasized the importance of having created a local organization entitled “Our
Family” to unify the Black lesbian community in the early 1980s. A younger women in
the audience, a Black lesbian who had been personally mentored by Kofi, expressed
appreciation to her for having served as both a mother and father, and for establishing a
formal association of Black lesbians in Detroit for younger women to rely upon. Thus,
Kofi not only benefited from supportive peer networks but had invested herself in
maintaining and expanding such networks for future generations.

Participants’ other heroes and role models, like national leaders and historical
figures, were further from home but inspirational nonetheless. Through their visions and
examples, people like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Angela Davis helped to spark some
participants’ passion for social justice.

“Martin King was on TV all the time, he was on the news, of
course we know his very courageous speeches really were
addressing issues that had been spoken on and written about
before, but not in the way that he was doing it. He was doing it
from a moral standpoint. He was a preacher. He had notoriety
as a Baptist minister from the South. He was an Alpha, that
gave him some credibility. He went to school at 15, went to
Morehouse. So here was a man who was able to really
articulate what’s going on in this country. Being a learned man,
he had everybody’s ear.” (Rita, Interview 2)

“… I stand tall on the shoulders of Barbara Jordan, Fannie
Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks. And knowing I can’t
say thank you to them personally, other than being the person
they wanted us to be today, I have to pay it forward. And
Shirley Chisholm was one of my biggest sheroes growing up. I
remember doing a report on her. She was just a force. I followed her all the way to her retirement home in Florida.”
(Sharon, Interview 1)

Participants described struggling considerably when these types of relationships (family, peers, role models) were not present.

“In many ways I felt very isolated from my peers and being in mostly White towns didn’t help. I didn’t make a lot of connections there. I didn’t have any really close friends in middle school.” (Tia, Interview 1)

“…there was a time when I would be around Black people and they would feel a certain way about something. A joke would be made or something would be said that they would understand but I wouldn’t get it. I wouldn’t know why I didn’t get it, and sometimes I wouldn’t care that I didn’t get it, but it bothered me that there was a separation. I felt separated from them.” (Tia, Interview 3)

“I truly thought I was the only one, you know. I don’t recall seeing any other girls who could have been gay…there wasn’t a connection. I didn’t even connect what I was feeling with the gay male students that the black students were talking about. It was like, I couldn’t even think that I could go to any of those guys and say ‘you know what? I like girls.’ ” (Kofi, Interview 1)

Thus, social connectedness and the existence of strong, supportive relationships with critically conscious others may represent one essential element in the development of critical consciousness.

Education

As discussed in the previous section, relationships were a key source of informal education, as participants were encouraged to think critically about prevalent social issues by their family members, same-age peers, and heroes. Teachers, like mothers and other important figures, were capable of creating nurturing and supportive environments for
participants. But teachers were also able to influence participants through formal education – the presentation of academic material directly addressing social systems and forces of oppression/resistance. Through formal education of this sort, participants were better able to develop the abilities to notice, understand, and name the social dynamics existing all around them. Key teachers were often the first ones to help them make connections between these larger forces and their personal experiences in the world.

“Mrs. Barrett was the sponsor [of the Black Awareness Study Club] because you have to have the teacher sponsor, [she] was our inspiration for that. Just planted a lot of seeds in us, and she challenged our thinking, and she got us to learn how to think critically, to question and to not just accept stuff. Don’t just accept what’s handed to you. Just do your research and look into getting the truth about it.” (Kofi, Interview 1)

“We had two Black teachers at that time, and we formed a gospel choir around my freshman year. So now we were singing the Black National Anthem, we knew about Africa, we knew about red, black, and green. This teacher had frequently visited Africa. I met up with her many years later as a teacher. Her name was Sheryl Franklin, and she helped us form this gospel choir. And that gave us a place to put our energy, a place to get that out without breaking the law. It gave us a chance to have camaraderie…So that’s when things started to really come together for me, and I started to have a vision of what it meant to be Black.” (Rita, Interview 1)

“…the teacher was this Black woman, she was gorgeous, and she had a smart mouth, and she was not gonna take any bullshit, and she would push, push, push. And her standards and her expectations were so high, that also I think that I really experienced for the first time how an intellectual project can be liberationist. And the teaching, and the research that she was doing, the ideas she was pulling together or having us to pull together. That was also like, ‘Oh, shit. I’m in there now because not only was the Christianity becoming more palatable for me which is also one of my languages, also the way I had navigated the world to date was being modeled for me as a means of resistance in itself. You know, that it’s not just about
me here, being smarter than people, but actually a way to roll out systematic change. So I got really into it and I think through her, I started to take a bunch of classes in Black studies to understand not only the classes but also the idea of the discipline, the idea of the field.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

Both formal and informal education played key roles in participants’ practice of critical thinking, figuring out systems, and broadening their understanding of how societal forces operate. Participants spoke often about the role of school (college, in particular) as a setting where critical consciousness gathered momentum.

“I took some courses in college. But you know I was motivated to take them, I wanted to, I wanted to learn. I knew it was just more than individual circumstances. I took a Pan-African class my freshman year in college and we learned about how oppression affects people around the world in different ways. Domination, and capitalism, and patriarchy and all that kind of stuff…I wanted to learn more, I knew there was more out here. I was just curious. I didn’t like being that state of what I was seeing. I didn’t like seeing the inequality of unfairness, whatever… And it was reinforcing, it was reinforcing. I get the information and they all wanted me to get more and more information. And certainly education I think that may have been a big factor for me, anyway. It’s not always a factor for everybody but for me having an education made a difference.” (Kofi, Interview 2)

“I went to an excellent, excellent public school. So everything I didn’t get at home, I got it in school. Foundation and understanding about democracy and civic duty. Political education heavily existed in my time. Learned right from wrong, knew how to make the system work for you. It also gave me a foundation, my school system, of how you should be treated.” (Sharon, Interview 1)

“…so then in college what clarified a lot of things for me was actually a class that I took called ‘Spiritual Dynamics of the Black Community,’ or something. And then we were reading all this Black theology, liberation theology, womanist theology, and whatever incipient language I had from my childhood from my mother, and from my own familiarity with
the Christian way, there was a really rigorous and critical analysis of that that I developed henceforth from the class. Which helped me to understand the racial formation that I’d lived through in a different way… I started to take a bunch of classes in Black studies to understand not only the classes but also the idea of the discipline, the idea of the field. It’s really about an intellectual project with political ethos.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“So after I graduated from college is when I feel like I started learning. Prior to college I was just doing what they told me to do. After that, I was like ‘this is what I need for myself.’ I ended up doing the Professional Excellence program where I could learn to become a facilitator in one of those transformational classes…I took a class called ‘Taking It Lightly,’ and took a weekend intensive that was really hard. That was the first time I admitted to myself that I wanted to be white. All these things that had to come through, subtle forms of oppression, of internalized oppression, internalized racism, I started to confront those things.” (Yvette, Interview 1)

It is notable that all of the women in this study were college graduates; two possess or were pursuing doctorates; several were daughters of parents with high levels of formal education. A few of the participants recognized their education as both a result of and a source of their own privilege.

“I am blessed I have the ability and the capacity and I have the privileges to be able to speak the words and to articulate and make use of it to help others find out about their oppression and what they can do about it, so that it’s not just a unfortunate thing to be oppressed.” (Kofi, Interview 3)

Of course, like with critical consciousness development itself, the women viewed education as a lifelong process. They did not see themselves as being “done” with learning. Now, daily life experiences and interactions serve to shape and inform their views.
“…as I listen to people’s stories, I learn something. I learn about them, about life, about oppression in different ways. Class oppression, oppression of transgendered men and women. I learn by reading books and watching films, attending trainings. I attend activities where I know I can learn something different…I’m a lifelong learner.” (Kofi, Interview 3)

“I think every day brings a new opportunity for learning…especially today with technology and new information coming in from all over the world, there’s stuff coming in every second. Right in my phone, I’m learning something scientific, something about people, something about the brain. We can never say we’re completely knowledgeable about something.” (Rita, Interview 3)

**Personal characteristics and struggles**

Based on their personal histories and my observations, participants generally shared certain leadership qualities such as initiative, assertiveness, and the ability to manage multiple tasks. Yet participants described their own personalities in many different ways – introverted, confident, peaceful, trusting, strategic, daring, stubborn. Several women even described themselves as having lacked confidence, savvy, or leadership skills as children.

“I was such a lover of peace. I was always reluctant to fight, to challenge the status quo as a youngster. I remember being very peaceful, very quiet, that was my nature…my nature really was ‘Everybody, can we just get along?’ That was really who I was…And I remember being in the background but as teenagers you kind of feel that mounting excitement and it’s easy to get carried away with it. I remember feeling like they [peers involved in civil rights movement] were doing the right thing, and I remember feeling that they had a valid reason for doing it. But I wasn’t in the forefront… I remember having that ambivalent feeling that this might be a huge risk.” (Rita, Interview 1)
“I guess there’s probably something in my nature, my composition, that makes me like observant and contemplative. I’m introverted which was an organizing challenge for a long time. I like to observe and think. So I think there’s something about my mind that’s working to make sense of the world around me.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“I was always a leader amongst my peers, always…High school and college, middle school too, there was this line in my constitution of not being afraid of conflict. Because I’d never sit down and say, ‘Standing up for this person would hurt my position.’ I couldn’t really sleep at night if I compromised my integrity for the sake of political liability or abandoning someone for something that was right or wrong…I probably couldn’t even be silent or go in the background. Just not who I am. So I’d get in trouble a lot. Socially responsible trouble, that is.” (Sharon, Interview 1)

“I like to go out to the skinny branches on the end, ‘cause that’s where the fruit grows, the sweetness of life is out on the skinny branches. It’s not hugging the trunk…You’re holding on to the trunk of the tree ‘cause that’s safe…I’m more of a skinny branches kind of person. I gotta explore and look at other options, find other ways…” (Yvette, Interview 1)

“I was very artistic. I was introverted and liked to draw. I would write my own stories. So I spent most of my time not socializing, like being at home after school making things…And we were very sheltered…I started to expand my consciousness around [religion] when I was around 14. I was always a deep thinker. I would journal, I would write. I was always questioning things and had this philosophical vibe.” (Tia, Interview 1)

Nearly all participants described some personal struggle, change, or growth process that resulted in the budding of new characteristics and an accelerated critical consciousness development. These struggles transformed the women in ways that contributed to their awareness. Personal struggles involved everything from crises of racial identity and weight/body image issues to sexual/gender identity development, loss
of a loved one, and difficult family relations. Notably, four of the six women shared that they had suffered from depression at some point, and several of them connected their depression to issues of oppression. This finding supports the feminist notion that the personal truly is political.

“It was so buried; I couldn’t talk to anybody about it. Not even one person. And I was depressed in college too and went to see a counselor, went to the counseling services. They had a counselor there and I was even afraid to tell him, I was even afraid to tell him in a confidential relationship, therapeutic relationship. I was afraid to tell him that I liked girls. That’s how scary it was, and how fragile it was for me. I really think that was part of my depression too, as I look back at that…I wasn’t ready to tell anybody...I mean, that was like a no-brainer for me. That was like survival, you know. And I didn’t come out until after college was over and I was back home in Detroit.” (Kofi, Interview 1)

For Kofi, this “coming out” struggle fueled a desire to build a safe, affirming community for Black lesbians in Detroit, so that they wouldn’t have to hide who they were and become vulnerable to the type of depression from which she had suffered. Her personal struggle at the intersections of race, gender, and orientation was a trial by fire that she ultimately conquered by building confidence in her identity, and helping other LGBT-identified people to do the same.

“…you either gotta learn how to put on a tough exterior or you will be defeated. And I have come too far to allow others who oppose who I am, what I stand for, for me as a Black woman, me as a woman, me as a lesbian, me as masculine-identified…I now have so much confidence and so much security in myself…I think that over the years I have grown a lot and I try to work to build the confidence in the young people coming up, in the same way.” (Kofi, Interview 2)
Similarly, Sharon expressed that both her struggles with weight and the loss of her son resulted in a new and deeper understanding of oppression, which now underlies much of her LGBT advocacy work.

“Unfortunately, I picked up weight in 2010 because I went through a huge bout of depression. At the happiest point in my life, I became pregnant at 42. However, my water broke at 5 months, I went into labor after one week in the hospital, and I delivered my son. He was stillborn and my life came to a halt….So I went through a huge depression… I mourned, and I poured myself into my work…I was a zombie until February 2011…Through this process I could barely get out of the bed. But I also learned the power of owning your oppression… Because once you get so far out there with your pain, you’ve got to decide whether you’re going to be a victim for the rest of your life, or victorious.” (Sharon, Interview 1)

Several of the women noted that through their social justice work, as well as personal growth experiences over time, they have changed and continue to evolve in their levels of awareness and critical thinking about oppression (and their relationship to it).

“I’m clear about the ways in which my thinking is more sophisticated than it was before. Or my willingness to fight is more whole, more there than it was before. Fear is a thing that I worked through in a progressive way… I’m introverted and I wrestle with fears of rejection or whatever else and so then to just go do the act of organizing to enter into conversation with someone, you have to deal with all types of fear of rejection…But these are the things where I can recognize how there has been progression in my thinking and I have worked through some of that. Which is not to say that it’s fixed, but it takes time to get over. (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“Teach, organize, those are the verbs. Those are the ‘do,’ they are the process through which I come to understand myself. Not the only ones, but they are part of the process of my development of how I understand myself in relationship to the world and to others… Yeah, [organizing] is a generative process and what it generates in part is me. There are other generative processes that generate me, that comprise me, that
produce the me that is me. It’s not the only one.” (Kimberly, Interview 2)

Healing has played a pivotal role in the development of consciousness for these women. Where the women grew personally, emotionally, and spiritually, they also grew in their ability to recognize and challenge social and political oppression. The women also acknowledged the importance of self-care in sustaining their work and overall well-being.

“I think 10 or 15 years ago I would have definitely defined oppression differently, more because I was still feeling very victimized and still very much in oppressive relationships, and very depressed. So I feel like I might have defined oppression as something that occurred on this personal level, and the ways in which I felt oppressed, like the ways I self-sabotaged. I would not have been able to point to some of the systemic things that were at play that ensured that I would be a single Black mother. I would not have looked at those dynamics or felt that that was at play at all in my life. I’d have been too busy trying to survive at the level in which I was trying to get myself back together. So, I feel like I had to get to the place of being healthy enough to get to the place where I could go, ‘Wait a minute! I can see the constructs!’” (Yvette, Interview 1)

“…to be able to discern the systemic normative pressures that are keeping us unhealthy, we have to have just enough health and be just enough past survival mode to be able to see. So you cannot be in survival mode and see. You can be in survival mode and take some action, but it’s either accidental action, like you might do something that is to your benefit but not know that you’ve done that, so you couldn’t repeat it because you weren’t really aware of it. Or you’re so damn tired and drained out that you can’t do a damn thing. You can only get up, go to work, and come home. You don’t have the energy or resources or psychic energy to do that.” (Yvette, Interview 1)

“And that’s why the Black lesbian retreats that I go to so much…I go there not just to have fun, for fellowship but to feel
like the norm...I think it’s important that women have their own spaces...those spaces are really important for me and women like me and people who identify similar to me. It’s a getting away from because you’re not dealing with racism and sexism and heterosexism when you’re there. So it is getting away from something, but it’s also going toward something, too. Um, a sense of being authentic and real, and connecting with others on a different and even spiritual level with others. And it’s always rejuvenating...where I can breathe, and don’t have to be so vigilant all the time...It’s so healing and therapeutic and liberating.” (Kofi, Interview 2)

Religion/spirituality/morality/ethics

Most of the women talked about engaging in social justice work simply because they “know right from wrong.” Thus, the perception of oppression as unethical served as somewhat of an imperative, imparting a sense of responsibility for working toward what is deemed right. For some of the women, religious convictions serve as one of the motivations for their activist efforts, and sociopolitical attitudes were shaped by early religious experiences. For others who questioned and turned away from formal religion early in life, spirituality is still an important basis for social justice work.

“I think my earliest language how the world should be and how it shouldn’t be, how to understand harm, was through Black Christianity. Not explicitly, but I look at what my mom was saying about love and it’s like a Christian model. Like, how you treat people and how you don’t treat people. And how things can become crooked or corrupt, or whatever. If people aren’t careful, and they aren’t kind. So that was my earliest language for the way I think.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“Can’t reach everybody all at one time. But maybe plant some seeds. Stand in as the voice of those who, because of the oppression, are unable to be at the table or to be in the spaces I have the privilege of being in. And if I’m there, I feel I have a responsibility. And part of that is my Christianity, my beliefs as a Christian too. Treat people equally. And that’s the message, sort of like spreading the gospel. It’s about loving one another.
The greatest of these is love. And if we’re hating, and we’re oppressing, and we’re discriminating, that doesn’t sound like love to me.” (Kofi, Interview 3)

“It’s a dynamic relationship where oppression pushes against us and we push back for our boundaries, for our space, for who we are. For being whole and connected, right? So when I start to see my boundaries are starting to dwindle, that I’m really allowing oppression to take over as opposed to being in tuned and connected, and listening and responding to what my spirit’s guiding me to do… I check in with my spirit because it is my true line and guide for what to share and when to share… ‘Cause spirit’s really clear. This is what I’ve come to. I realize my spirit’s really clear. When I don’t follow it, that’s when I’m off track… When I don’t ask or I’m not listening, that’s when we have a problem. That’s when I’ve got my screen up.” (Yvette, Interview 2)

Passion/purpose/persistence

Most participants described a strong sense of purpose and passion guiding their work. One participant described feeling that she is “on the right track” whereas others stated that they were led by powerful forces (family history, personal passions, spirit/Creator) into the social justice work they do now. Such passion and purpose was frequently cited as the reason that participants persisted in their work despite setbacks.

“I feel like it’s the type of life that I’m supposed to be in for the person that I am. When I look back at concrete things that are in the world that weren’t before I put them here, like wins or campaign victories, or changes in the people around me whether they’re students or co-workers or whatever else, or papers, ideas. That’s a good feeling, it’s a rewarding feeling… It makes me feel like I’m on the right track. But it’s also a difficult where that’s not always the case. I don’t always feel like I’m on the right track. I feel like it’s too hard and I’m tired. I wanna do something else… Usually in those moments,… I honor my commitment to others and then in so doing, I realize, ‘Oh yeah, this is it. This is what I want for myself too, I’m not just doing it for other people.’ It is just really important for me to try and think about this as, ‘This is
not an individual project. This is something we do with other people.”” (Kimberly, Interview 2)

“I’m glad I’ve evolved in this space. I feel that I was searching for purpose at this juncture in my life, 2 years ago, and I needed to attach myself to a cause that I could wake up every day and believe that I’m doing the right thing for the right people. People who are truly marginalized, people who need help finding their voice, and I could just be a quality contributor.” (Sharon, Interview 2)

In regard to sense of purpose, Yvette mentioned a process of searching, listening, and attending to “indicators about where we’re supposed to go next, what we’re supposed to do next.” This reaffirms the idea that development by definition is an ongoing process for participants; one’s sense of purpose can evolve and change over time.

“I’ve been listening for what the manifestation is of my gift to the community, my commitment to the community, because I know it’s evolving. There’s stuff that I’m doing right now that I know is of value but I also feel like I’m at this stage where I’m saving babies from the river. That’s what I feel like I’m doing right now. Going to the schools, working with the schools, it has value especially for the students who actually get to be in the class. It does help to re-route the school to prison pipeline. But it doesn’t go the source. I recognize that it’s like a step that I’m taking toward something larger and more meaningful...I’m living with this question, for James [husband] and I, ‘Who are we committed to being for our community and how do we commit ourselves in ways that matter to the planet with integrity and heart?’ And from there, we’ve been watching. We’ve been listening. We’ve been paying attention and we’ve been noticing. Some opportunities have come our way for us to do different kinds of work, and now what we have to do is speak to that and make some decisions around that... So we’re listening everywhere for indicators about where we’re supposed to go next, what we’re supposed to do next.” (Yvette, Interview 3)

In contrast to the other participants, Tia did not express a strong sense of purpose tied to social justice work. In fact, she stated that she does not feel a need to actively
challenge oppression at this time, because there is “no situation right now that is asking for that” from her. However, she did state that she felt called to empower people of color, though she is still searching for ways to do so.

“I don’t know that I have to challenge [oppression] right now. Because there’s no situation right now that’s asking for that from me...If someone that I know has a problem going on, or if I have something to physically fight, then I will. But I don’t have anything that I can physically fight right now. The things that I can fight are one of a hundred things that I could fight that everyone else is fighting. And I could just pick one or I could pick ten...There’s nothing personally glaring at me right now... We talked about how the mission of [Milwaukee racial justice organization] will be more to empower people of color as opposed to fighting or trying to get White people to see their own privilege. I felt more comfortable with that because that’s what I like, is empowering people. That’s what I feel more passionate about. I don’t feel passionate about trying to get White people to see their privilege...So that’s what my position is, of where I feel called to really do something. How can I empower?” (Tia, Interview 2)

What was the impact of critical consciousness on daily life/social change efforts?

Participants identified several ways in which critical consciousness makes a difference in their everyday lives, and in the ways that they choose to engage in social justice work.

Ways of manifesting critical consciousness

Participants chose to utilize their consciousness by working toward social justice in various ways. Although several of the women stated that they would never call themselves “activists,” they described engaging in “vigorous action in support of or in opposition to one side of a controversial issue,” which is the Merriam-Webster (2012) dictionary’s definition of activism. Participants focused more on their engagements in
certain types of actions (i.e. organizing, teaching, speaking, listening) rather than on the broader category of “activism.” Organizer Kimberly described her reasons for this tendency:

“I would never call myself an activist. I will talk about myself as an organizer, I’ll talk about myself as a teacher, I’ll talk about myself as a researcher. I don’t know why I don’t use the word activist. I think it kind of has an evacuated concept. Organizing and researching sound like tasks. I don’t know how to ‘activist’ but I know how to teach…So no, I don’t identify that way. For me, it is a constitutive part of who I am.” (Kimberly, Interview 2)

However, Kofi challenged the images conjured by discussions of activism, especially as it pertains to certain groups:

“…there are different definitions of activism. A lot of people think activism is being out there holding picket signs and all of that, and that’s activism. But when you think about, Ruth Ellis never held a picket sign in her life. But what she did by just being out, and coming out and as an African American woman, to be out? At the age and the time that she did? Now, that to me speaks volumes moreso than a lot of other types of activism that I’ve seen. We’ve got to really be flexible when we talk about what activism is, especially when you’re living on the margins.” (Kofi, Interview 2)

Whether or not they embraced the “activist” label, participants reported engaging in work that recognizes and actively challenges oppressive forces. Most frequently, their critical consciousness was manifested through one or more of the following methods:

- **Dialogue/listening/relating:** participants described this as a form of activism which challenges oppression by honoring the voices and experiences of oppressed groups. This was quite evident during observations of Kimberly, who spent several hours canvassing a working class New Haven neighborhood. Though part of her purpose in this activity was to gain support for a working class, Black female candidate in the
upcoming primary elections, another objective was to hear directly from residents the primary issues affecting the community. Kimberly engaged neighborhood residents in open-ended conversations regarding everything from gun violence to unemployment. She described this as the most important aspect of her organizing work, because it reminded her and the residents themselves that they are the “experts in their own community, their own lives and visions.” The expression of empathy, sharing of experiences and perspectives with others, and relationship-building were all key forms of activism for each of the women in this study.

“...to me, the dialogue in itself is activism. You know, a lot of people think it’s just talk, we’re just sitting up talking, but I really think there’s a power and empowerment in the process of talking, the understanding, the empathy, the compassion, the building the bridges, the connecting, the forming relationships within those conversation really makes a difference. I’ve seen people do it, I’ve seen people kind of change their minds, they change their attitudes, the change their beliefs. Just ‘cause they had a conversation that they never had before, because they never engaged in it before.” (Kofi, Interview 2)

- **Questioning/encouraging questioning**: participants described openly questioning the status quo and encouraging others, especially young people, to do the same. Such questioning elucidates social patterns rooted in oppression and challenges people to consider alternative ways of being. Yvette described how she regularly encourages the high school students that she works with to engage in questioning:

  “I had a teacher in the classroom with me this past school year and it was so wonderful to watch this dynamic unfold because I saw him set up the guys and the girls in a certain
particular way, treat the girls a certain way, treat the guys a
certain way. The guys were always chillin’ and relaxing, the
girls were always running, getting the work done.…I said,
‘Time out for just a moment. Has anybody noticed who gets
asked to do what around here? Who’s doing the asking?’
They’re like, ‘Oh, right! The teacher is doing the asking’…
There’s this thing that’s always going on, and you don’t even
know. And we don’t usually pause and notice where it’s
coming from. So I’m going to invite you guys to ask a different
question, because this is how we’ve been fighting amongst
each other, right?...I’m going to ask you to start looking around
and noticing, who is doing the asking. And then ask yourself,
who are they? And what do they have to benefit if so and so
does it?...So I invited them to, just in a small way, look at their
teachers from a different place. To me, that’s freedom. And
that’s working at oppression at a level that is so powerful
because it’s undoing what I would call the internalized racism,
things that keep us from being able to look.” (Yvette, Interview
1)

- **Advocacy:** participants described defending and speaking on behalf of those not
willing or able to see oppressive dynamics and defend themselves. I observed
Sharon, head of a national Black LGBT advocacy group, at a meeting with the
LGBT Health Coalition and officials from the Veterans Administration in
Washington, D.C. Sharon, one of three ethnic minorities at the meeting, raised
issues affecting the health benefits of LGBT veterans of color. When a member of
the Coalition began speaking abstractly about issues of race and class, Sharon’s
response was “No, let’s talk about Black folk, the people you’re actually going to
see in your hospital.’ Though she expressed frustration that day over often being
subtly “assigned” the task of addressing race issues, Sharon later disclosed during
an interview the reasons that she continues to play this role:

“People who are truly marginalized, people who need help
finding their voice…as they empower themselves, for them to
know that they have a friend, that they have a sister in the movement. And we have a lot of talent in our community as we have a lot of creative, intellectual talent. But a lot of times they’re just discriminated against because of their gender or sexual identity; it has nothing to do with their God-given talents. [I am] just being somebody that can sound the alarm on that intersection of hypocrisy.” (Sharon, Interview 2)

- **Direct challenge**: Participants actively confronted oppressive forces through participation in large scale social change efforts such as protests, rallies, and marches. They also wrote challenging letters or made phone calls to politicians or media figures.

  “We get on this bus and go to the other side of town to the Black neighborhood. People are already standing outside, just hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of neighborhood residents. We proceed to walk six abreast, this march down the street. There’s ice on the streets, it was freezing. We just marched down the street through the neighborhood, chanting, people were coming to their windows. I’m like, ‘Oh, wait! This is the thing I wanted to do!’ And so I’m in this march and we’re going down and then it stops in front of the hospital which was about to expand into this neighborhood. There was this Black Pentecostal preacher screaming like it was church…and he was hollering about, ‘We need this, and this’ and it was so cold…And I was there and I remember coming home from that and saying, ‘Mom, these people are crazy up here, but I like it.’ “ (Kimberly, Interview 1)

  “I don’t know if I make a decision, any conscious decision on my part, to react to microaggressions that might happen…But when I notice stuff that’s not being included, or there’s an assumption made about gender, I just kind of point it out, I guess…I don’t tell myself, ‘Okay, I’m going to give this person a lesson on oppression or privilege.’ It just happens…And basically when I’m calling people out it’s usually to make corrections in the terminology about something. And to challenge people on what I call thinking errors, justifications for doing things that are inappropriate or that are against the law or that are just wrong…I could very well stay fearful and not say anything and just sit and do that.
And I’ve done that in the past. I’ve been passive and won’t say anything. But now, even if I read something in the paper that I’m really passionate about or they got it incorrectly, I’ve actually written letters to the editor…And I’ve called on radio talk shows…So that’s part of what I do, I guess, just to get people to think. I know what it’s like to be an oppressed minority. So why shouldn’t I speak up, why should I just sit there and let it happen?” (Kofi, Interview 3)

Vigilance/constant awareness/awareness of others

Critical consciousness, for some, was as much a burden as a blessing because it cannot be turned off. For some of the women, there was a sense that critical consciousness obliges one to constantly see and analyze dynamics of oppression in daily life, even when one might wish not to.

“Sometimes it feels burdensome. I hate to admit that. Even in my own house, I really resent the TV being on and all that buffoonery on all the time…Our self-image and the media choices leads into our daily lives in a very specific way. I feel like, if I know better then it’s my responsibility for the people around me to know better. If I know that there are 32 sitcoms on tonight and none of them have Black people on them, or they don’t have a true image of Black people, then I can’t let my children sit there for six hours and watch that…So there’s something that you have to answer to all day long with a consciousness. (Rita, Interview 3)

“I guess because my daily experience is usually some combination of direct organizing or research…it can be difficult to just be in some way that’s not trying to make an intervention or critique. I have to often be very mindful about just existing and not letting things bother me or incite me in some type of way… I think in my life, figuring out what leisure looks like is sometimes difficult. Figuring out what rest is sometimes difficult because I find that I’m always on and thinking about these things…I think about the world the same way, whether I’m at work or whether I’m not…So my life has been probably over-determined by these things that take up a lot of time, that are really, really intense emotionally, and
intellectually, relationally. I don’t have, on balance, I don’t have many spaces where none of that’s going on.”

For others, critical consciousness was something that had to be deliberately maintained; if not, one might fall into a naïve outlook on society (one Freire described as “false consciousness”). Yvette described methods that she uses to remain awake and aware of the systemic nature of oppression.

“So I’m pretty smart. I can psych myself out and rationalize anything if I wanted to. So I need help to see those parts of where I’m not tuning in to all the elements that are really at play…Even with this concept of staying awake and having critical consciousness and involving yourself, it’s still challenging. We still have to worry about that there’s still things we can’t see. There’s things we can do. Like when I’m in the circle, I really tune it to my body. I’m aware of any visceral reactions I might be having, I’m aware of thoughts that are going through my mind. But not enough to take me out of the process, I just notice what comes up…So I feel like the ‘smarter’ we become, the more stealth we are at psyching ourselves out and maybe even having things become more subtle. So for me, I have to really pay attention…In the midst of being in the circle, one of the things I do to keep myself in tune is I breathe deeply. And breathing exercises through a meditation that I worked with, that helps me stay connected.”

(Yvette, Interview 2)

A key element of participants’ awareness was a perception of where other people fall on the critical consciousness continuum. Participants described having to accept others who displayed limited perspectives or an unwillingness to acknowledge other worldviews. They depended upon their awareness of others’ viewpoints to shape how they choose to approach and structure their social justice actions.

Rita demonstrated this during my observation of her at a local training for community members selected to facilitate a series of neighborhood forums. Based on her
professional background in Afrocentric education, Rita suggested that facilitators utilize traditional African symbols (“day names”) and processes (sitting in circle by age, asking elders for permission to speak) to honor the African heritage of the neighborhood’s residents. The group of community members appeared resistance to this suggestion, with several expressing unwillingness to reveal their age or be called by an African name. Rita was visibly upset by this opposition, mumbling “Resistance” under her breath. However, she calmly reminded the group that such symbols and processes were not mandatory, simply suggestions of culturally relevant practices to incorporate into the forum events so that youth attending the forums would experience some affirmations of their heritage. She then explained the significance of elders in the African tradition, and allowed the community members to move onto another topic. However, she later told me that she would “implore them again next week, because we are losing our kids while these people want to stay in their comfort zones.”

During interviews, participants frequently described this tendency to remain alert and responsive to where others are:

“I’m also very allowing this space for people to be who they are and where they are, with all their pain. Even with them just spewing the pain. It’s just much more of a story to that picture than what I’m getting to see…And I’m also just very aware of the environment that is set. It’s also important to me to hear where they are and to have a deeper understanding that they’re committed to involving themselves. I need to hear that, I’m listening for that…And for those who are very committed to involving themselves, we’re going to go there. And they’ll get more of me, but they’ll also pull more of themselves into the process. So we’ll all transform then…And if they’re not ready for this particular process at this particular time, that’s okay.” (Yvette, Interview 2)
“…a couple people talked to me and said, ‘Rita, it is hard for some people to see. You do have something different that allows you to understand this. You cannot pull people, you can’t yank them, you can’t insist. You’re going to have to be patient with their level of development and their level of understanding.’ I said, ‘Okay, then. Alright, I’ll wait. I’ll see what happens.’” (Rita, Interview 3)

“Well, it bothers me a lot because I wish people would just get it, and not need to have me explain, or debrief it, or process those moments. Because they would just get it. And then I have to tell myself I can’t expect for people to just automatically get it, and I can’t take for granted that they know this stuff…That they know they’re going to be offending someone if they say certain things…I can’t 100% fault hetero-attractional people, for example, that they’re assuming hetero-attractionality unless otherwise specified. Because we’re not brought up to believe there’s variation in attractional orientation. So I can’t fault them, ‘cause I didn’t grow up that way either.” (Kofi, Interview 3)

“I know it’s a tough conversation that we as Black people are afraid to have with ourselves because we’re afraid of the unknown and we don’t want to accept this type of change… My expertise is understanding how Black people function and the Black experience of bringing Black LGBT, especially professionally, squarely into the spaces and the dynamics of the Black world…you have to meet people where they’re at. And I saw people struggling with something because no one had ever challenged them in the level of that required them to see beyond themselves.” (Sharon, Interview 2)

Responsibility/obligation

In addition to a constant awareness, participants described critical consciousness as leading to a sense of responsibility or obligation to their ancestors, heroes, or communities. They engage in their work because they feel on some level that their ability to recognize and give language to oppression necessitates their challenging it, and their defending those who cannot. For most, this was tied to a recognition that they were afforded the privilege to become educated and to receive encouragement by caring adults.
and peers in the development of critical thinking skills. There was a sense of “paying it forward,” and also of carrying on the work of those who came before.

“I can make sure that whenever they’re invisible to make them visible and stand on behalf of them if they’re not included, or there’s no voice for them there, I have an obligation to do that...Stand in as the voice of those who, because of the oppression, are unable to be at the table or to be in the spaces I have the privilege of being in. And if I’m there, I feel I have a responsibility.” (Kofi, Interview 3)

“I want to be part of the continuation of the field of Black Studies... That came to me from the people who I was taught by who had come out of the movement and wanted to see young scholars coming up and choosing to go into the department whose existence they fought for, and whose existence they had building occupations to make possible. So why would you go into Sociology when we had to strive to get this here, and now it’s here?” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

**Anger/frustration**

Participants frequently mentioned that their awareness of oppression and their work in the social justice arena frequently invokes certain emotional responses. Anger and frustration were the two most frequently mentioned emotions. The women described feeling angry and frustrated about their own oppression and the levels of oppression and injustice suffered by their group of interest (i.e. LGBT people, working class people, children of color, etc.).

“I think that the types of harm that I’ve personally experienced, they make me furious...when my sense of how things should be rubs up against how things are, it makes me so pissed. It makes me so angry. My anger has been, at times, explosive about it. And sometimes it’s been like kindling, or brooding, grumbling or whatever. But usually it is just those moments of collision between my expectations and how the world is, it’s just clarifying. It just gives me laser-like...
accuracy… And it’s like, that’s how it is. And it’s clear, and my anger propels me forward.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“There are things where people know better, and that’s where I really get angry… I get angry a lot of time too because I feel like I didn’t create this oppression. So, I feel sad. I feel angry.” (Kofi, Interview 3)

“I’m so tired of people thinking it’s okay to do the status quo thing… Sometimes it just weighs on me… It saddens me…. I’ve seen spirits broken. I’ve seen the frustration of being marginalized and oppressed. It really incenses me. It incenses me like it’s nobody’s business, realizing how hurtful people can be.” (Sharon, Interview 2)

Yvette was particularly vocal about her anger during my observation of her “Healing Racial Harm” retreat. She animatedly expressed rage, wrung her hands, rolled her eyes, huffed and puffed whenever she told or was listening to someone else’s story of experiences with oppression. During our final interview, she shared one particularly telling story about her recent trip to a racial justice conference in which she sat a table with a young Black woman who had experienced medical trauma. Also present at the table was a White social worker who Yvette recognized as minimizing the young Black woman’s pain. Yvette describes her emotional reaction as those seated at the table engaged in dialogue:

“So I get the talking piece next and I feel so much rage inside of me. And I let myself be where I am fully… Weeping and sadness and suffering that my sister went through because of racism, because of a racist, unaware system. People not looking and waking up. I talked to my sister first by saying, ‘I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry for your pain.’ … And then I said to the White woman, ‘And you have the nerve to not even look at her, look at her!’ And I had the talking piece and I was pounding it on our table. ‘This is the problem with privilege. Privilege does not give you the skills to cope and deal with
pain. You are being inhumane by not even being present for this pain. And here’s the deal, people of color experience this stuff as trauma. Now for you this is just a nice idea, an ‘aha!’ moment for you. But for us, it’s traumatic. And then you become these voyeurs of our pain. That’s jacked up, too. I’m done with y’all. White people, y’all need to talk to each other. Stop talking to us. Do your homework, figure it out, leave us alone because we’ve got enough stuff to deal with your system.’ So then I passed the talking piece to James and then I took it back, ‘No I’m not done!’…Here I am being the angry Black woman again, see?”

*Expectations of the work*

Through their efforts, participants describe having learned to expect certain things from their work and others with whom they work. These expectations have been shaped by participants’ active engagement in social justice work and the realization, over time, that their initial approaches to systemic oppression may have been over idealistic and/or naïve. Increased contact with systems of oppression provides the women with increasingly nuanced views of how oppression functions and can be addressed, supporting participants’ beliefs that critical consciousness development is an ongoing process. Though the women described experiencing discouragement at times, they also expressed hope that their social justice work is meaningful and makes a difference. Activist work has provided these women with hands-on learning experiences which now shape what they anticipate in regard to their causes, and how they define progress on any given issue.

“I realize that I’m doing the work now, but the harvest might come years beyond me. I might not even get to see it. So then I began to have to develop this faith and trust that my work isn’t in vain. I’m working with these families, I’m working with the principal, I’m going to these meetings, taking these courses trying to understand what Afrocentric is... It’s not
going to be like a place-setting where I can see where my fork goes, and my spoon and my knife. It’s not going to look like that. It’s not going to be a neat presentation. It’s going to be just a little piece of me, and it’s going to be everything else in the world having an impact as well...yes, there’ll be some tiny hint of light, but the real final effect may be way beyond my purview...So then I began to note that my consciousness would be ongoing. I wouldn’t arrive at a date and a place and say, ‘Aha! I get it.’...My expectation has changed whereas I thought you get to a place of consciousness and you show it by doing something great to prove it and then you let the world pat you on the back for it...Now my expectation is to just keep working. Keep working, make sure others reach their potential. That will be proof of my consciousness, that I help others reveal to themselves what is left for them to do.” (Rita, Interview 2)

“I think what I have to hold on to for myself and for the work that I do is this idea that you put energy into the world, you put things out there and you push one way whether that’s by conversation or on a syllabus or whatever else, in a chapter. You put something out into the world and there’s incremental and significant change happening all the time...But also to understand how change gets made and how things get built, over time. Because the world didn’t get like this overnight and it won’t become something else overnight. It’s like that patient, incremental, loving, change that we have to make. In time, person by person.” (Kimberly, Interview 1)

“[My work] definitely has changed me in a multitude of ways. It’s changed my understanding about power dynamics. It’s definitely changed my belief system in the kinds of things that we have to do to get the proper attention that we deserve. It’s not something that we can do with a blind eye. It’s got to be very intentional about trying to gain recognition for our community that is going to make a difference in the quality of lives of our constituents. It’s not something that can happen in silos. You’ve gotta be able to engage strategic arms for everything from public voices to the Black community.” (Sharon, Interview 2)
Counter-example: Tia

Tia appeared a unique case in several ways. Data from her interviews yielded several themes not identified in the other participants’ interview data. First, she more frequently described lacking awareness (being oblivious and “transcendent”) in a way not described by the other participants. It is interesting that she is aware that she is unaware.

“Sometimes I feel like…there’s ways I overlook things that go on that really are what they are, and if I were more conscious maybe I would be really angry about some things. Maybe I would. Maybe there’s just some things I’m not seeing. So I wonder if there’s ways I’m just not as conscious as I should be.” (Tia, Interview 1)

“I’m starting to wake up to how there’s ways that I’m not aware. I’m also wondering if it’s okay that I’m not aware.” (Tia, Interview 3)

Tia described a keen sense of isolation during her formative years, a lack of the types of interpersonal connections that other participants mentioned as central to their critical consciousness development. In addition, she often wondered ‘where others are’, rather than expressing a developed awareness of their different perspectives.

“People who are in the spotlight or people who are able to influence things. I look at them and wonder if they’re being aware of the impact… I look at that and that makes me wonder about people.” (Tia, Interview 2)

“I watched this movie a few weeks ago with some White friends of mine who I see semi-regularly…I’m now questioning where they’re at. Because they all enjoyed the [racist] movie. So now that my friends have seen it and like it, I’m wondering about where they’re at in regards to what I’ve woken up to in that movie. I thought about having conversations with them about it.” (Tia, Interview 3)
Further, Tia appeared in both interviews and observations to be more conflicted about her individual role in challenging oppression, and less reconciled with her privileges. Because she did not identify herself as ‘oppressed,’ she appeared to feel somewhat disconnected from the dismantling of oppression.

“That’s why I feel conflicted. I’m like, ‘Am I supposed to be feeling joyful?’ I feel pretty darn good and my life is good…I’m not miserable, so I wonder if there’s something wrong with that. There’s a part of me that feels like I’m not taking it seriously because I feel like it’s asking me to take that on. The race work is asking me to take on the weight, pain…There’s this conflict because I’m happy to be here…In the system of oppression, [there’s] so much dis-resolve. And people in my life are experiencing that right now. I can’t identify. I’ve never really had to fight for anything, and even now I can’t really identify anything worth fighting for, for myself. So my struggle is to really to feel empathy for those that are, those that do have something that they’re really working on, and are feeling disadvantaged about. And am I really taking this seriously if I’m not struggling for something in my life?”

Finally, she described not feeling strongly about engaging in social justice work. Though she acknowledged its importance, she portrayed a feeling of not doing enough, and of not being “legitimate” or “serious” as a social justice worker.

“I’m comfortable where I am right now. I don’t feel like I have to necessarily do anything. I feel like when the time comes, I can and I will. Like something major. I feel like everyone around me is doing something really active and all I’m doing is picking something out on a daily basis that I think had to do with capitalism or White supremacy. There’s ways that I engage in conversation with people about it, but that’s as far as it goes right now. I feel like that’s just the stage of development I’m in right now. Versus someone like [activist friend] who does a whole lot more work around it and footwork and legwork. That’s just not where I am. So that’s how I feel like I’m transcendent still, in many ways.” (Tia, Interview 1)
“I would even go so far as to say I don’t feel a strong urge to fight for justice. I felt like I kind of get drawn in by association because these are my friends. But it’s even given me insight. I do need to be a part of this. I don’t feel like I need to pick up the torch and fight for justice. Some people get involved consciously for that reason. I feel like I’ve come into in a roundabout way. And so I just see it as now I see that all of this needs to be addressed. We all need to be conscious and aware of this. And my way of approaching it is going to be my way of approaching it. So there’s a way that I feel less legit because I didn’t go looking for it. It found me.” (Tia, Interview 1)

Since most of the women here described critical consciousness development as an ongoing and iterative process, it becomes interesting to understand Tia’s particular position in the development of critical consciousness. Based on my observations of her, I would describe Tia as more inquisitive and ambivalent, less self-assured than the other participants when discussing issues of oppression. During my observations during the “Healing Racial Harm” retreat, Tia asked several questions of the facilitators that implied a nascent comprehension of social dynamics (e.g., whether people of color can be complicit in oppression).

Tia described experiencing growth in her level of understanding, and she reported a “passion” for empowering people of color. She, like the other participants, viewed herself as constantly learning, continuously developing and transforming into a more aware and empathic individual, even throughout the course of her participation in the study.

“Well, I can say that a lot has changed from our first conversation. All the incidents I’ve mentioned to you have done things to grow my awareness, and so I’ve been doing all
this work this summer that has really brought growing for me.”
(Tia, Interview 3)

At the same time, she displayed a lack of confidence and direction in her social justice work. This could be an issue of personality or individual style, but it also seems likely that Tia simply exemplifies a different stage of critical consciousness development. In this way, she serves as a useful comparison and an interesting addition to the examples provided by the other participants. This matter is explored further in the next chapter.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY & DISCUSSION

This study explored the process of critical consciousness development among a sample of Black women in the United States. The purpose of this study was to elicit these women’s perceptions of the conditions, influences, processes, and experiences that contributed to their conscientization. The study was rooted in a Black feminist theoretical perspective that conceptualizes and analyzes the effect of multiple and intersecting identities and oppressions on the actual experiences of Black women, emphasizing Black women’s methods of coping, surviving, resisting, and acting to change systems of domination (hooks, 1995). The Black women interviewed for this study were thus placed at the center of analysis, and the phenomenological method utilized captured their self-defined viewpoints and perspectives on their own lived experiences. This final chapter will summarize results of the study, formulate conclusions based on the data, discuss implications for counseling and social justice work, consider limitations of the study, posit suggestions for future research, and conclude with my personal reflections on the research journey.

Summary of results

Results of this study extended and echoed much of the available literature on critical consciousness development. Like previous research with Black women activists...
(Neville and Hamer, 2006), I found that both internal and external factors influenced the critical consciousness development of my participants. Common processes such as the larger societal climate and key political events helped shape women’s awakening to sociopolitical realities, as did life circumstances such as growing up poor or being raised in politically active families. In addition, strong role models and personal experiences with oppression fueled consciousness and activist efforts. Like the Black women activists described by Neville and Hamer (2006), women in this study demonstrated that consciousness can develop throughout the lifespan; some women did not develop critical consciousness or become involved in social change efforts until later in life based on their social realities and personal experiences. In addition, some women developed consciousness through participation in formal organizations that offer political education, whereas others gained consciousness through more informal means (i.e. personal experiences). This finding supports the notion that Black women’s experiences are diverse and that development is truly an individualized process.

Critical consciousness development was also found to be an iterative, ongoing process. Supporting the findings of Mustakova-Possardt (1998; 2004), data from this study suggests that critical consciousness is not a particular way of being, but a lifelong pathway. Though it is easiest to think of critical consciousness in its fully developed form, studies like this one allow us to track how it actually evolves over the course of the lifespan. Women routinely described the evolution of their consciousness as a work in progress, and the ongoing combination of gaining new knowledge, engagement in social action, and reflection upon one’s experiences perfectly exemplifies Freire’s concept of
As Osajima (2007) notes in his study of Asian American activists, no one person, class, or program single-handedly transforms the lives and critical consciousness of developing activists. The experiences of Black women in this study demonstrate that critical consciousness is built upon a rich, ever-changing tapestry of circumstances, relationships, and efforts to make sense of one’s social context over time.

This is not to argue that critical consciousness does not take place in stages. Several scholars have proposed stage models delineating a sequential order to the evolution of critical consciousness (Freire, 1973; Martin-Baro, 1994; Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998). Given the iterative nature of critical consciousness development, these stages may not be as discrete as suggested by such models. However, it remains plausible that individuals pass through phases, ranging from acritical (unaware of power inequities and engaging in personal blame for social ills) to liberation (full awareness of sources of disempowerment and involvement in sociopolitical action). Tia, for example, described herself as being in a certain stage of development, one in which “all I’m doing is picking something out on a daily basis that I think had to do with capitalism or White supremacy. There’s ways that I engage in conversation with people about it, but that’s as far as it goes right now (Interview 1).” Watts and Abdul-Adil might argue that Tia represents an individual currently experiencing the pre-critical stage, where there is “an emerging understanding of asymmetric power relations and their adverse effects on the lives of the oppressed (pg. 139),” but not yet a “deeper realization of the sources of oppression, accompanied by the impulse to work toward social change (pg. 139),” as exists in the subsequent critical stage. Based on data from this and other studies, though, it is likely
that one may cycle through such stages at various paces and in several rounds over the course of one’s life. A person may also have achieved a certain stage at one level (intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, state, international) but a different stage on another level (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). For instance, someone like Kimberly may easily recognize oppression on a social group-level but be less prone to perceive it within herself (intrapersonal), whereas Yvette described her unearthing of intrapersonal oppression as a necessary precursor to understanding interpersonal, group, and state-level domination.

Though other theorists have described critical consciousness as purely cognitive, specifically naming it as the cognitive component of sociopolitical development involving an understanding of historical, social, political, and cultural oppression (Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil, 1999), data from this study suggests that conscientization consists of affective and behavioral elements as well. For instance, Yvette’s description of her experience at the racial justice conference exemplifies how heightened awareness can trigger strong emotions that may then be expressed through some form of action (in Yvette’s case, a verbal confrontation of the race and gender dynamics at her table). In this way, the development of critical consciousness among Black women activists mirrors the developmental processes of activists and allies in general. Bishop (2002) provided a six-step framework for understanding the development of social justice allies that combines cognitive, affective and behavioral components. This stage model notes that the formation of social justice allies begins with understanding oppression (how oppression began, how it is maintained, and how it impacts individuals and institutions that
continually recreate it). However, the model also acknowledges that emotional pain accompanies an increased understanding of one’s role in the cycle of oppression. Bishop (2002) asserts that healing this pain is essential to breaking the cycle of oppression and growing as a social justice ally. Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) similarly argued that the process of developing critical consciousness can be quite anxiety-provoking, as it requires one to abandon existing worldviews, but that over time this budding awareness creates the impetus to act upon oppressive systems. Consistent with these notions, participants in the current study noted the emotional impact of their constant awareness of oppression (anger, sadness), but also described being “healed” through their increased understanding and social justice efforts. Thus cognition, affect, and behavior are all implicated in the process of critical consciousness development. It is important, then, that neither of these three components be discounted in the conceptualization of critical consciousness.

Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) urge researchers to also keep the concept of morality in the forefront when examining topics related to oppression and liberation. They argue that oppression and liberation are moral issues, and a moral element indeed emerged from the current study’s interview data. Mustakova-Possardt (1998) suggests a strong moral motivation for social justice efforts rooted in critical consciousness. Some of these motivations include correcting or avoiding harm, fulfilling a sense of moral responsibility, emphasizing relatedness and empathy, and demonstrating faith in the wisdom and meaning of life. Certainly, many of the women’s responses during this study denoted these elements of morality and suggested a strong discernment of good/bad and
right/wrong related to oppression and liberation. For these women, moral values helped to identify not only what should be eliminated but also what should be created in human families, groups, and societies. Developmental theorist Gilligan (1982), whose work focused on the experiences of women and girls, supported the idea that empathy, caring, interconnectedness, and responsibility constitute key aspects of moral development. These concepts also surfaced as themes in participants’ experiences.

For some participants, this moral component was strongly linked to issues of religion and spirituality. Two of the women, Kimberly and Kofi, linked their moral support of progressive social change directly to their Christian religious faith. This appears counterintuitive when viewed from the position of mainstream U.S. society, which often associates allegiance to a Christian conceptual system with the conservative social agendas of the “religious right” (Lakoff, 2002). Yet, this finding lends support to research which suggests that U.S. Blacks engage in different religious interpretations than do many Whites, since Black understandings of religion have historically been shaped in opposition to the oppressive structures of mainstream U.S. society (McDaniel, 2010). Black Christianity, especially when rooted in the tradition of Black liberation theology, tends to emphasize not only the individual’s responsibility to society but society’s responsibility to the individual as well. This religious perspective argues that God is on the side of the oppressed and that it is the duty of Christians to eliminate systems of oppression (Cone, 1997). For Yvette, who described questioning and then consciously turning away from the Catholic teachings of her upbringing, spirituality still played a large part in her choice to actively challenge oppression. She, along with most of the
participants, displayed what developmental psychologist Fowler (1981) termed a *universalizing* faith. This stage of moral development, the last in his Stages of Faith model, is embodied when a person views all people as belonging to a universal community and therefore treats everyone with a high level of compassion. In this stage, one believes that all people should be treated with the universal principles of love and justice (Fowler, 1981). Mustakova-Possardt (2004) suggests that a moral developmental process intersects with and influences the development of critical consciousness, fostered by environments which emphasize the exercise of love, knowledge, and will. In this study, it was evident that most participants were indeed motivated to activism through the exercise of love, knowledge, and will.

Conscientization was a notably social process for participants. Critical consciousness was forged largely in social settings, where connection, support, and encouragement from significant others were crucial facilitators of understanding. The existence of safe environments for the exploration of social issues, complete with non-judgmental social support, were important factors for all of the participants in this study. As Osajima (2007) noted, the development of critical consciousness does not happen with individuals working and studying on their own, but in relationship and collaboration with others. Such a statement echoes the belief of Freire (1970; 1973) that critical consciousness is a collective experience and that liberation is a social project. The case of Tia demonstrates that a sense of social isolation could form a barrier to the development of broader consciousness. Critical consciousness has the potential to break individuals’
sense of isolation, aloneness, and individualism by discouraging people from explaining life solely in individual terms (Osajima, 2007).

Another highlight of this study was the role of education in the process of critical consciousness development. Education—through classes or involvement in student groups and organizations, work experiences, or daily life experiences—sparked participants’ recognition and awareness of the way societal conditions were impacting their lives and the lives of others. This awareness allowed participants to begin “naming their world,” an important step toward actively changing it (Freire, 1973; Osajima, 2007). Such a sentiment harkens back to Freire’s (1970, 1973) emphasis on praxis, reflection upon the world in order to transform it. Participants’ educational experiences, both formal and informal, provided opportunities to develop the awareness, analysis, action, and accountability that Love (2000) identifies as key markers of praxis and vital components in the development of critical consciousness.

Across the relevant literature, conscientization has the common effect of transforming individuals (Mustakova-Possardt, 2004; Neville & Hamer, Osajima, 2007; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996) whereby previously held views and notions of apathy or indifference to sociopolitical issues are replaced with conceptual and analytic understandings of how one’s personal life connects to social and political realities. Results of this study echoed this sentiment, and highlighted the feminist notion that the personal is political. Women in this study were forthright about their personal struggles and transformations, which directly or indirectly impacted the way they thought about oppression and social change. This study also pointed to the fact that there is great
diversity among the sites and contexts in which women conduct social change work. Family, group, and community sites were prevalent among this study’s participants, mirroring the efforts of women in general (Moane, 2010). This reality suggests that society (and researchers) need to expand narrow definitions of what constitutes “activism” or “social change” to acknowledge important work conducted at the personal and family levels. Baumgardner and Richards (2000) acknowledge that “everyday acts of defiance” constitute the building blocks of activism, and an “activist” identity. Moane (2010) similarly suggests that the “cycle of liberation” may involve starting at personal levels and expanding to group, community, and society-level efforts over time and development. Similarly, Bishop (2002) argued that before you can become an ally of others, you must become “a worker in your own liberation” (p. 100). Many of the women in this study followed this pathway, finding a need to challenge intra- and inter- personal levels of oppression before broadening their efforts to address group and community-level issues.

A few of the participants in this study worked for causes that some might argue don’t impact them directly (e.g., a married, straight woman serving as an advocate of the LGBT community, a middle class graduate student organizing on behalf of working class and poor communities). Such cases demonstrate that Black women often serve not only as activists on their own behalf, but also as allies in support of causes related to other oppressed groups. Literature that examines the development of allies suggests that there are numerous motivations for such work on behalf of outgroups, and not all of them are evidence of critical consciousness. For instance, some people become allies in order to
fulfill a desire to be seen as a hero and savior, to reduce guilt that they feel about their own privileges, or even to earn spiritual salvation for themselves (Edwards, 2004). Such paternalistic and self-interested motivations often lead to ineffective, if not downright harmful, social justice efforts that involve the ally speaking for members of the oppressed group rather than collaborating with them against oppressive forces (Reason et al., 2005). In contrast, an ally motivated by social justice recognizes the systemic nature and interconnectedness of different forms of oppression, the harm inflicted by social hierarchies upon both oppressed and oppressor, and the need to work in partnership with oppressed people in order to liberate all of humanity from systems of domination. It is this social justice motivation that was exemplified by the women in this study, most notably Kimberly and Sharon who spoke about “owning” their privilege while creating space for the voices and perspectives of disadvantaged communities.

Another perspective on this issue is provided by Myers, Speight, Highlen, Cox, Reynolds, Adams, and Hanley (1991) whose African-centered model of identity development argues that such work reflects a shift in one’s conceptual system. Myers’ model posits that as individuals move toward an optimal worldview (Myers, 1988), their sense of community deepens and expands such that they experience an interdependence with all humankind. They also begin to understand the true nature of oppression and to realize that all people can be oppressed, depending upon one’s assumptions (based on worldview) about the nature of self and others (Myers, et al., 1991). Cross’ (1978; 1991) Nigrescence model of Black racial identity development proposed a similar stage, Internalization-Commitment, in which one comes to appreciate the value of both ingroup
(Black) and outgroup (non-Black) members while making a long-term commitment to social justice. Hardiman and Jackson (1992), in their Social Identity Development Theory, also note that social justice workers from both target and oppressed groups move toward defining and internalizing social identities that are independent of oppressive hierarchies. Individuals who identify as targets of oppression work to achieve their own liberation and in the process, may identify areas in which they actually serve as agents of others’ oppression. Throughout this ongoing exploration and development, such individuals can develop empathy for other targeted groups and may dedicate themselves to work in those groups’ interests. Each of these theories of identity suggest that activists who serve as allies to outgroup communities, like some of the women in this study, may be said to have reached stages of identity development wherein they perceive the interrelatedness of various forms of oppression, as well as various forms of liberation.

Implications for counseling psychology

For counseling psychologists, findings from this study provide insight into the lived experiences of Black women that may aid in efforts to help them prevent and heal from the psychological scars of oppression. Research has demonstrated that racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression that commonly affect Black women represent forms of chronic stress that can inflict lasting cognitive, emotional, and even physiological harm (Israel, Farquhar, Schulz, James, & Parker, 2002; McBride, 2011; Speight, Isom, & Thomas, 2011; Utsey & Hook, 2007). Ginwright (2010) argues that “healing occurs when we reconcile painful experiences resulting from oppression through testimony and naming what may seem to be personal misfortune as systemic oppression”
Thus, truly addressing the mental health needs of Black women means openly addressing issues of oppression (Garcia, Kosutic, McDowell, & Anderson, 2009; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005), and a comprehensive analysis of oppression must address both its political and psychological aspects (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996).

Counseling psychologists working with Black women need to acknowledge that many Black women are engaged in social justice work (though they may not label themselves ‘activists’) in that they are constantly attempting to confront the oppressive forces that threaten their well-being and the well-being of others like them. In acknowledging this, psychologists would be well-poised to assist Black women in steering away from the psychological processes of oppression (e.g. learned helplessness, internalization, etc.) and to instead develop a broader awareness of the ways in which sociopolitical realities influence and intersect with their personal issues. Counseling psychologists can encourage clients to critically examine their own identities as Black women, and the social positions and viewpoints tied to these identities. This involves the painful process of “confronting and deconstructing negative societal images and expectations, especially if they have been internalized” (Speight, Isom, & Thomas, 2011, pg. 32). Through this process, clients gain a chance to recognize areas of both oppression and privilege operating within their personal lives, and to interrogate the larger social structures that determine and keep these realities in place.

Through political education and prevention work, counseling psychologists can help Black women strengthen their critical consciousness as a buffer against internalized oppression and demoralizing systems of domination. Education regarding both the
political and psychological dynamics of oppression may serve a protective function, socializing Black women to understand the nature of the oppressive structures that they are likely to confront in their daily lives. Prevention work might mean fostering support networks, encouraging spirituality, or introducing affirming images to counteract dominant stereotypes of Black womanhood (Speight, Isom, & Thomas, 2011). With the prevalent and ubiquitous nature of assaults on Black female identity, it is unlikely that any Black woman in the U.S. will remain completely untouched by oppression. Thus, psychologists must also be prepared to provide remedial interventions addressing the painful ramifications of oppression while (and perhaps by) facilitating the development of critical consciousness.

The data here suggest areas for helping professionals to remain aware of: the cyclical and ongoing nature of consciousness development, key factors in the development and maintenance of consciousness (e.g., relationships, education, etc.) and the ways in which critical consciousness may manifest in Black women’s lives and actions. Counseling psychologists will need to remain prepared for some of the “side effects” of critical consciousness development, such as emotional reactions or strain on collegial relationships, and help clients process these occurrences as typical landmarks on the path to increased awareness. Bishop (2002) recognized that being an active social justice ally is difficult. In step six in her model of ally development, she discussed the importance of maintaining hope and idealism while working for social change. Similarly, counseling psychologists can help Black women recognize that the development of
critical consciousness, much like any ensuing action toward social change, is a long-term journey.

Given the central role of relationships described by participants of this study, counseling psychologists working to help Black women name, question, and act upon oppressive social forces may need to facilitate such interpersonal connections where none are already present. They may also recommend educational, organizational, or spiritual resources that will help clients unmask the political processes operating in their lives.

At the same time, psychologists should give clients the space to narrate their own transformative processes. This study, similar to that of Neville and Hamer (2006) draws attention to the pivotal role of personal transformation in the development of critical consciousness. Assisting clients in confronting their personal fears and weaknesses might very well prove to be a crucial step in facilitating critical consciousness development, along with helping Black women overcome some of the ways they may have been socialized to remain quiet, self-sacrificing, self-doubting, or stoic (Neville and Hamer, 2006; Speight, Isom, & Thomas, 2011). Psychologists can also help women to identify moral and social values guiding their choices of when, how, and with whom to actively challenge systems of oppression of which they have become aware.

Social justice advocates should note that participants’ development consisted of repeated exposure to sociopolitical information, interpretations, and learning opportunities. Such experiences, even if not fully grasped initially, set the foundation for later understanding (e.g., Kofi and Rita both stating that they remember political conversations among family at their childhood dinner tables, which they ignored when
young but later came to realize as significant). This finding is consistent with research on the early learning experiences of political activists which suggested that learning about political realities sensitizes individuals to political processes and contributes to certain “habits of mind” later in life, such as activism (Merelman & King, 1986, pg. 475). Therefore, patience is required on the part of advocates attempting to help others enhance their critical consciousness.

Exposure, coupled with the asking of “deceptively simple questions” can provoke discussion about circumstances in the world and raise consciousness faster than a mere preaching of social justice values (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002). Thus, it is important to set up environments in which it is safe for women to engage in intellectual exploration once introduced to new questions and ideas. Studies describing activist development (Broido & Reason, 2005; Merelman & King, 1986; Munin & Speight, 2010; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007) confirm that although chance encounters or opportunities to examine social justice issues may initiate the process of critical consciousness development, individuals’ engagement in the process is more effectively sustained in environments that value, structure, support and reinforce critical reflection and social change behavior (praxis). Each of the participants in the current study described contact with some environment of this sort, whether home, school, work, or community organizations. Many of them also strove to re-create such environments for others. One example is that of Yvette, the restorative justice worker who regularly engaged high school students in critical questioning about their everyday classroom experiences.
Yvette was also a good example of the challenge that oppressed people face in contesting the legitimacy of oppression while not over-identifying with the negative stereotypes of their in-group. Quintana and Segura-Herrera (2003) note this “balancing act” as one of the primary challenges of critical consciousness development for members of heavily stereotyped groups. It is a dilemma well articulated by Dubois (1903), who described it as a “double-consciousness,” whereby people existing within oppressive contexts develop two (often conflicting) senses of self— a sense of who one is and a second sense of how others view or “measure” one in a stigmatized way. The social psychological concept of the Looking Glass Self (Cooley, 1902) also describes this process whereby people shape themselves based on what others perceive and in effect, confirm other people's opinion of them. In other words, selves are created along the premise: *I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am* (Cooley, 1902).

It is by this mechanism that oppressed people, in an effort to question out-group dominance, can fall into a trap of increasing in-group cohesion through the reification of negative in-group stereotypes. In the case of Yvette, an emotional outburst spawned by her awareness of unjust racial dynamics resulted in her playing “the angry Black woman” role at a local conference. Similarly, Kofi bemoaned the anti-intellectualism displayed in her Detroit community where she is labeled an “elitist” for having earned a higher education. And Sharon admitted to playing the “strong Black woman” by overextending herself in response to weight discrimination. All of these scenarios represent examples of how false consciousness – the internalization of dominant ideologies regarding one’s self
and one’s group – can inhibit the emancipatory potential of critical awareness. In these cases, Yvette and Sharon turned their awareness of oppression back upon themselves rather than effectively challenging the system (until later, when they both consciously decided to address the oppression directly). Kofi fell victim to the notion that Blackness is antithetical to education and upward mobility (though she never truly internalized this notion, she bore the ostracism of other Blacks who had). Fanon (1967) in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* offers a psychoanalytic perspective on the inferiority complexes engendered by Blacks in White-dominated societies. He describes in detail the complex processes of internalized oppression that cause many members of oppressed groups to buy and play in to their own subjugation. Those working with Black women to increase critical consciousness must be aware of such conundrums and offer vigilant support in distinguishing between critical and false consciousness.

This ability to question and reject the dominant ideology about one’s group has also been discussed by Petersen (2009), who interviewed four disabled Black women about their educational experiences. Like the women in the current study, Petersen’s participants found that interactions with teachers, peers, role models, and family members significantly influenced whether they rejected or internalized messages they received about themselves from the larger society. Two of the women in Petersen’s study demonstrated inconsistent patterns, internalizing some stereotypes while attempting to reject others. For these women, efforts to challenge oppression were significantly less effective and their demonstrated ability to recognize connections between oppressions was much weaker. Petersen concludes that these two women had not yet fully developed
a critical consciousness, just as I have concluded that Tia represents a different stage of development than the other participants. Like Petersen’s two participants, Tia appeared more conflicted and less confident in recognizing and challenging oppressive circumstances. Tia admitted to having internalized negative messages about other Blacks during her childhood, and having felt judgmental towards them. She is also similar to Petersen’s two participants in that she lacked early role models for sociopolitical analysis and was indoctrinated into traditional and often negative understandings of herself and her own group. In several ways, she embodied a Pre-encounter stage of Black racial identity development. Cross (1978; 1995) defined this stage as characterized by assimilation into mainstream (White) society, an under-appreciation for the significance of Black identity, mis-education about one’s own (Black) racial group, and racial self-hatred exemplified by negative attitudes about the self. Thus, Tia’s identity as “transcendent” took primacy and greatly affected her worldview in regard to not only race, but also gender, class, and religion. For a woman with life experiences similar to Tia, the ethnic perspective-taking ability described by Quintana and Segura-Herrera (2003) might not appear as strongly as it would for someone having been encouraged to develop such skills at an early age. This demonstrates that for counseling psychologists, it is critical to know where individuals fall in regard to critical consciousness development in order to properly address and understand their perspectives and their options for avoiding the internalization of oppression.

Finally, counseling psychologists and social justice advocates must be willing to examine their own level of critical consciousness development while working with Black
women clients. Even in multicultural counseling practice, the very nature of most helping professionals’ training predisposes them to a potentially oppressive, “one-up” relationship with their clients (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Psychologists and advocates must be willing to divorce themselves from the role of expert and instead opt to follow Black women as the experts on their own realities. Only through such “egalitarian moments” (Freire, 1971) of solidarity with clients can psychologists and advocates begin to truly understand how larger systems impact Black women’s individual lives. From there, professionals must make the choice to accompany Black women in deciphering ways to navigate within and among these intricate contexts. Specific counseling interventions may include reflective questioning, creating critical genograms, mapping social capital, exploring social identities, or examining systems of privilege and oppression (Garcia, et al., 2009). On a broader level, however, psychologists must also be willing to engage in interventions outside of the therapy room, including policy work, social advocacy, and social action that challenges the oppression at its roots (Speight & Vera, 2004). Such is the type of helping practice required by a true psychology of Black women, as called for by Thomas (2004).

Limitations of the study

As a phenomenological investigation, this study utilized a small, homogenous sample that may not be generalizable to a wider population, and was not necessarily intended to be. Although findings are consistent with much of the literature regarding critical consciousness development, it cannot be assumed that the experiences of these six women are representative. As previously noted, all of the women in this study are college
graduates and thus, share an experience of relative privilege that distinguishes them from the majority of Black women in the United States (19% of whom have college degrees; Conrad, 2008) and indeed from most people in the United States (30% have college degrees; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). They were also all situated in the Midwest and Northeast regions of the country, although two of them were raised in the Southeast. The fact that these six women (and none of the other women originally solicited) agreed to take part in this research project, thereby identifying themselves as Black women activists with high levels of critical consciousness, introduces a degree of self-selection bias into the study.

The study’s small sample and choice of data collection methods point to another limitation that may have impacted the conclusions of this project. Throughout this discussion, I have identified Tia as an outlier whose data reflects her differing stage of critical consciousness development. The only way to confirm this conclusion, however, would be to collect more data in order to ascertain whether there are, in fact, other Black women activists who display similar characteristics. One might argue that Tia’s dissonance from the rest of the participants was actually proof that this study did not reach an adequate data saturation point, or a point at which no new ideas or codes could be provided by additional data. Indeed, the possibility exists that interviews and observations with additional participants would have revealed a different picture of Black women’s critical consciousness development. However, the chosen research approach for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, a method committed to the in-depth examination of a small number of research participants. This idiographic approach
recommends no more than 6 participants, especially for beginning researchers, so that each account can be given adequate time and attention during the process of data analysis. For this study, I obtained six participants and conducted multiple interviews with each one, along with periods of observation. Thus, my focus during this project was on depth rather than breadth. Tia’s dissonance from the rest of the participants, however, serves as an invitation for me (and other researchers) to continue this line of inquiry to better explicate the varied expressions of Black women’s critical consciousness development.

Another potential limitation to consider is the self-report nature of this study. The intent of this study was to examine the honest perceptions and experiences of the participants. To this end, I attempted to establish rapport, encouraged participants to speak openly and honestly, and on several occasions reminded interviewees to be as forthright as possible. I also engaged in my own observations of participants in order to corroborate interview data. Nonetheless, it is entirely possible that some participants may have felt it necessary to create an especially favorable impression. Thus, there is the likelihood that participants refrained from sharing important information about their lives or their perceptions, or that they elaborated on aspects of their experiences that they felt would reflect on them positively. Despite these possibilities, every possible action was taken to capture the true essence of the women’s perceptions and that the study provides valuable insight into the participants’ worldviews.

A related consideration is the subjective nature of my involvement with this research project. I am a Black woman who challenges oppression on a regular basis.
Therefore, this topic is personally meaningful to me on various levels. While my proximity to the subject fuels my enthusiasm, it may have also greatly influenced the ways in which I collected, interpreted, and analyzed data. It must be acknowledged that my interactions with participants also may have shaped their responses and indeed altered the way they thought about things. Although this is true of all research, it is especially important to acknowledge in a study such as this one which aims to highlight the authentic voices of the research participants themselves. Openly acknowledging my own influence in the process and outcomes of the study is a hallmark of qualitative research, and does not detract from the fact that this study was conducted with a high degree of rigor and reflection.

Finally, despite its developmental emphasis this study could only provide a snapshot of participants’ lives due to time constraints. Data was collected over the course of six months, with most interviews being conducted between June and October 2011 and observations conducted before or immediately after each initial interview. Since it was not a longitudinal study, it was not really possible to witness significant markers of development among the six women. With the exception of Tia, none of the women felt that they changed drastically from the beginning of their involvement with the study until their final interview, although most of the women found it helpful to have participated and received a chance to reflect on their own experiences.

Suggestions for future research

Given this final limitation, one obvious area for future inquiry would be longitudinal studies of critical consciousness development. A longitudinal research
design, following individuals from childhood through early adulthood and beyond, would certainly add a deeper perspective to our understanding of the conditions and processes influencing critical consciousness. Comparative longitudinal studies involving Black women of varied social standings – class, religion, education, age – would honor the diversity of the Black female experience while highlighting key factors in the global fight to end oppression.

The field of psychology in general should be more involved in the study of critical consciousness. Whether from a social cognitive, developmental, or clinical perspective, critical consciousness is a multi-faceted construct that has relevance to anyone interested in human thought, emotion, and behavior. Counseling psychology, with its social justice agenda (Fouad, 2004), should be especially vested in research related to this topic because it would increase our ability to understand and empower the diverse populations that we serve. Perhaps counseling psychologists have a moral obligation, a personal and professional responsibility to care for other people, not just as individuals but as collectives suffering under systems of hegemony, and to use psychology as a tool for social justice (Speight & Vera, 2004). A deeper understanding of critical consciousness, and the ways in which it may be fostered and promoted, would be a key contribution that the field of psychology could contribute to the promotion of social justice. For example, additional qualitative research on the construct would helpful to further define and explore the concept, but quantitative measures may also be useful to help clinicians and researchers gauge and evaluate the construct in a more concrete fashion.
The current study demonstrates that in building a theory of critical consciousness development among Black women, it will be crucial to recognize personal transformation as a consistent theme across the literature. It will also be essential to make connections with related developmental processes such as that of racial identity, ally identity, activist identity, and morality. Though these are distinct constructs that certainly possess their own unique pathways in certain respects, in other ways they seem to parallel (if not cross or overlap) one another in a manner that would be important for researchers and clinicians alike to understand. Unanswered questions related to this point include whether critical consciousness might serve as a precursor or catalyst for the advanced stages of racial identity, what factors determine whether individuals with high levels of critical consciousness will identify as activists, or how moral development might be impacted by both racial identity and critical consciousness. These are just a few of the important questions worthy of pursuit.

*Personal reflections*

Like any student embarking on a dissertation project, I was initially overwhelmed by the tasks that lie ahead. The need to grapple with epistemological and theoretical issues, to deepen my understanding of Black women’s long history of social change work, to delve into the critical consciousness literature and sort through its various meanings and interpretations, and to somehow devise an appropriate way to operationalize the term for my own recruitment procedures – these all appeared as menacing obstacles on the road to project completion. Yet, once I began to meet my participants, such tasks no longer posed much of a threat. Throughout this research
project, I have been continually inspired by my engagement not only with the six women that graciously elected to participate in the study, but with their stories and the everyday worlds they inhabit. Through my brief observation periods, I was able to catch glimpses into the varied ways that Black women choose to challenge oppression at its core. By these efforts and the years of personal growth and transformation through which these women have come to their current standpoints, I was deeply encouraged. Gaining access to the personal narratives and worldviews of these women has reminded me of the value of these types of research projects, no matter how intimidating for the researcher.

The project was also valuable to me as a catalyst for my own ongoing critical consciousness development. I was changed by this study mainly by being constantly reminded that I (like all people) am still a work in progress. As I asked the women to describe their life histories and thoughts regarding critical consciousness, I was also asking myself. In my reflective research journal, I chronicled my own development and found parallels between my experiences and those of my participants. For instance, I expressed the need to remain engaged in community organizing and grassroots development work while still completing my academic requirements (like Kimberly), and explored how my role as a mother of two Black boys impacts my analysis of the mainstream educational system, healthcare industry, and media culture (like Yvette and Rita). I also wrestled with the reality of my own relative privilege, and wondered whether I should be more angry or saddened by the state of the world (like Tia). For instance, during the course of the project the Occupy Wall Street protest movement against economic inequality sprang up in New York and spread across the country, including my
hometown of Cleveland. As the movement grew, I wondered if it would be one of those pivotal “societal changes” with the potential to impact not only my own understanding of structural oppression, but that of an entire generation. In my reflective journal, I noted the irony I felt over my lack of involvement in the local Occupy movement due to my focus on a dissertation project about other Black women’s activism.

While this kind of reflection helped me to distinguish my own voice from those of the participants, it also assisted me in better understanding the meaning of these topics in my own life and developmental process. I came to have a deeper appreciation for the power of qualitative inquiry to transform my perspective as both a researcher and consumer of research, as I struggled to decipher and articulate significant aspects of the research journey.

Conclusion

This study aimed to describe the experience of critical consciousness development among a sample of Black women who challenge oppression. In-depth interviews and observations revealed that participants viewed their development as an ongoing process involving thought, emotion, and behavior. Participants also identified key factors within their own lives that supported the development of awareness and action. These factors (societal changes, experiences of oppression, relationships, education, personal struggles, spirituality/morality, passion/purpose) find support in the available literature pertaining to critical consciousness development among Black women and other social groups. Many of these factors are shared with other developmental processes, such as the development of activist, ally and racial identities.
The women in this study, like Black women throughout history, utilized various means of manifesting their critical consciousness. Through dialoguing, listening, questioning, advocating, and directly challenging oppressive circumstances, they made efforts to transform their worlds. They also experienced the consequences of critical consciousness in their daily lives: constant vigilance, a sense of responsibility to others, anger and frustration, and modified expectations of their social justice work. Counseling psychologists should develop an understanding and appreciation of these findings in order to work effectively with Black women.

In the end, this study contributes to a psychology that honors the perspectives and privileges the voices of Black women, including my own. Inherent in the development of such a psychology is the need for more critical consciousness among researchers, educators, practitioners, participants, students, and clients alike. There are key factors and conditions which can foster critical consciousness development in order to continue a long and multifaceted tradition of resisting domination, challenging oppression, and promoting social justice for all people.
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APPENDICES
Hi, my name is Laura Turner-Essel and I am a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at the University of Akron. I am seeking Black women to interview for my dissertation, “Critical Consciousness of Black Women Activists.” Through this study, I will be examining how Black women who challenge oppression have come to be aware of that oppression and act against it. I was referred to you because of your participation in efforts to challenge oppression.

Your participation in this project would involve three interviews, lasting 1 to 2 hours each. These interviews can be conducted either in person or by phone. I would also like to spend some time observing as you engage in whatever anti-oppression efforts you are involved in for at least two hours. This is just so that I can put the information you provide in your interview into a larger context.

I will provide you with an informed consent letter that will explain more about the study and allow you to make an informed decision about your participation. I will be contacting you again soon, and you can let me know whether you choose to participate. If so, we will schedule our first meeting at that time.

Thank you!
APPENDIX B

SCREENING QUESTIONS

This study examines how Black women become aware of oppression and choose to challenge it. Please answer the following questions about yourself.

1. Do you feel that oppression exists in society?
2. Do you feel oppression plays a role in your individual life?
3. Do you feel that oppression on a societal level is somehow connected to oppression in your individual life? If so, how?
4. What forms of oppression are of special interest to you?
5. How do you respond to the oppression that you observe in your daily life?
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

My name is Laura Turner-Essel and I am conducting my dissertation research on the topic of critical consciousness development among Black women activists. Because of your active participation in efforts to challenge oppression, I have been referred to you as a possible participant in this study. This research aims to examine the process that Black women undergo as they become aware of the larger social forces that impact their individual lives, and how they decide to actively challenge racism, sexism, classism, or other forms of oppression.

In order to participate in this study, women must agree that they meet two main criteria:

1. They possess a strong awareness of how social, political, and/or economic realities influence and are related to their individual lives and issues
2. They make conscious efforts to create change in these social, political, and/or economic realities in order to challenge oppression and injustice

If you agree that you meet these criteria and would be willing to take part in three 1-2 hour audio-recorded interviews, your participation will be confidential and your input highly appreciated. Please see below for a list of questions that will be asked during the interview.

Section I – Focused life history

1. Can you describe your life as a young Black girl?
   a. What was your family life/neighborhood/school life like for you as a young Black girl?
2. How would you define oppression, based on your experiences as a young girl and now?
3. When did you first become aware of oppression in your life?
   a. Can you share some details of the event that first made you aware of oppression?
4. What significant adults influenced your ideas about oppression, and how?
5. How did you first become involved in challenging oppression?
   a. Who encouraged you to become involved in this effort?
Section II – Details of the experience

1. What does the term ‘critical consciousness’ mean to you?
2. What do you see as the role of oppression in your individual life today?
3. Can you explain how you became aware of the ways that oppression impacts you?
   a. What experiences, people, personal qualities, or events helped you to become more aware?
   b. What experiences, people, personal qualities, or events seemed to be obstacles to your awareness?
   c. How do you remain aware now?
4. How do you actively challenge oppression in your life today?

Section III – Reflection on the meaning

1. What role does your consciousness of oppression play in your daily life?
2. How does this awareness influence your efforts to challenge oppression?
3. What does it mean for you to engage in activism/resistance of oppression?
4. How have you come to understand your development as a critically conscious woman?
5. What has been important in maintaining your consciousness?
6. In what ways do you see yourself developing into the future?
   How does it feel to think and talk about this topic right now?
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Department of Psychology
College of Arts and Sciences
Akron, OH 44325-4301
(330) 972.7280 Office

My name is Laura Turner-Essel and I am a psychology doctoral student at the University of Akron. I am conducting a dissertation study under the supervision of Dr. Suzette Speight which examines Black women’s awareness of and efforts to challenge oppression. Because of your involvement in efforts to challenge oppression, you have been asked to participate in this study.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in a series of three in-depth, semi-structured interviews to be conducted either in person or by phone. Each interview will take 1 to 2 hours and be audio-taped. You will also be observed engaging in your efforts to challenge oppression, whatever form they take, for at least two hours. Observations of your activities will NOT be visually recorded, but I will take notes.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to contribute to psychological knowledge of Black women’s consciousness development while providing time and space for you to reflect upon your own experiences. This may lead to improved efforts to promote awareness among Black women and other oppressed groups.

Risks and Discomforts: Only minimal risks, no greater than those associated with daily living, are expected.

Benefits: Your participation will help me to better understand Black women’s experiences of oppression and social consciousness, and may help you to better understand your own experiences. I will provide you with a final write-up of the study so that you may see how your story fits with those of the other participants.

Confidentiality: Unless you consent to be identified by name, your name will be changed to protect your identity. Check the box below only if you agree to have your name used in the study.

I agree to be identified by name and understand that any information I provide during interviews and/or observations will be linked to me.

By signing below, you are agreeing to participate in an audio-recorded interview regarding your awareness of oppression, and you are agreeing to allow me to observe you engaging in activities that challenge oppression. This consent letter will remain on file in a safe and secure location.

_______________________________________  ____________________________________
Signature    Date    Printed Name

Thank you for your time and consideration.
APPENDIX E

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

June 2, 2011

LARA ESSEX-ESSEX
2195 E. HAWKINS AVENUE
Akron, OH 44315

From: Sharon McWhorter, IRB Administrator


Thank you for submitting your Exemption Request for the referenced study. Your request was approved on June 2, 2011. The protocol meets minimally risk to subjects and involves the following federal category for exemptions:

☐ Exemption 1 - Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.

☐ Exemption 2 - Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior.

☐ Exemption 3 - Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, if subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.

☐ Exemption 4 - Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.

☐ Exemption 5 - Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to the approval of Department of Agency Heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.

☐ Exemption 6 - Basic and clinical research evaluation and consumer acceptable studies.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study’s design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects or include activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, please contact me to discuss whether or not a new application must be submitted. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. This office will hold your exemption application for a period of three years from the approval date. If you wish to continue the protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit another Exemption Request. If the research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with his thesis or dissertation.

Ct: Susanne Speth - Advisor

Ct: Stephanie Words - IRB Chair

Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Akron, OH 44325-2102
330-677-6688 • 330-677-6291 Fax

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