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Kyee Altranice  and Brandon Mitchell 

ABSTRACT

Conscientization is the process of learning to perceive sociocultural, economic, and political oppression to such extent one is moved to act against it. This transformative and liberatory pedagogy has momentous implications for social work education; as its outcome is an increased critical consciousness for both students and faculty. However, the process of conscientization and its foundational mechanisms are understudied. We therefore conducted a descriptive phenomenological study on professors whose teaching or research combat systems of oppression. We provide a composite structural definition of conscientization, and a composite textural–structural description of its catalysts. We discuss how our study builds on the current liberatory education empirical base, as well as the implications of our findings on education and practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Conscientization (CZ) is the process of “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2018, p. 35). CZ is a critical educational theory and pedagogy that has vast applicability across the social sciences. In the past decade alone, the result of the conscientization process—critical consciousness (CC)—has been used to predict different forms of civic and political participation among urban youth (Diemer & Rapa, 2016), help African American women overcome the pathology of the StrongBlackWoman (Bryant, 2018), assess college persistence among Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (Cadenas et al., 2018), and promote critical thinking and dialog among Saudi college students to create active learning environments where respect is procured across a diversity of thought (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2019).

CZ and antiracism movements within schools of social work

Police brutality

Recently, the police shooting deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd, Daniel Prude, and Breonna Taylor have garnered widespread media coverage and sparked national outrage. In response, the nation has rallied with advocacy efforts—including peaceful protests in every U.S. state (Haseman et al., 2020; Ortiz, 2020; Raymond, 2020). As the momentum builds toward a social justice revolution, social workers must be adept at leveraging this energy toward racial justice action. In social work education, the current social justice movement often aims to resemble one of antiracism pedagogy. Thus, pursuits toward racial equity depend on research and practice being rooted in antioppressive education (Jeffery, 2005; Tedam et al., 2013). However, the extent to which schools of social work offer instructional instances of antioppressive action, or merely reproduce the dominant ideology, is understudied (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Jeffery, 2007).

Schools of social work, and their slogans of antioppressive pedagogy, often run contrary to the capitalistic mechanisms that fund and dictate school functionality (Bhuyan et al., 2017). Additionally, less is known about their ability to promote CC within the developing social workers they educate (Jeffery, 2005). This is partly because catalysts for CZ within student populations may depend on the level of CC attained by the professors educating them (Landreman et al., 2007), meaning that transformed educators operating from a state of CC often possess the level of awareness necessary to spur CC within the student body (Freire, 1985). How one attains CC within the process of CZ is an understudied area of research (Reed et al., 1997). Furthermore, these processes are crucially important to study within social work institutions, across students and educators (Bussey et al., 2021; Nicotera & Kang, 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic

In addition to the highly publicized incidents of police brutality, the COVID-19 pandemic has also helped to shed light on the racial inequities permeating our society—reinforcing the importance of social work education. This novel virus disproportionately affects minorities in contraction rates, critical care hospitalizations, and deaths (Chowkwanyun & Reed, 2020; Khunti et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). These health disparities are a likely result of longstanding exposures to the poverty to which communities of color are often confined. Specifically, lower socioeconomic status comes with a host of deleterious effects, including: structural health inequities, comorbidities, and poor diet due to food deserts, as well as higher exposure to air, water, and waste pollution (Washington, 2019). As awareness of structural racism increases, social workers must advance toward more comprehensive antioppressive education and practice.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has helped to fuel this movement toward critical conversations by reinvigorating a focus toward diversity, equity, and inclusion during their 2020 conference (CSWE, 2020). The importance of social work's realignment toward racial equity cannot be overstated. However, this mission must be situated in conjunction with antioppressive social work in research and practice. Understanding the mechanisms of CZ is integral to relationship development and the sustainment of antioppressive social work (Bussey et al., 2021; Freire, 1992/2014).

The importance of social work education may be crucial to educating students through the process of CZ, ultimately arriving at a place of CC (Landreman et al., 2007). The process of CZ also presents an opportunity to recognize privilege, forge relationships, and enhance community, as well as raise critical thinking and awareness to structural forces of oppression (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Collectively, the pursuit and exploration toward understanding CZ is of the utmost importance to educating social workers who wish to become effective antioppressive researchers and practitioners (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2016)

Methodology

CZ conceptualization for research design

For the purpose of this study, CZ was operationalized as a process having two parts. The first portion is *learning to perceive sociocultural, economic, and political oppression*. The second portion was *taking action against the oppressive elements of society*. We then applied this conceptualization of CZ to the purpose, aims, and research questions of our study. For the purposes of this article, we focused strictly on the second portion. It is important to emphasize that this conceptualization was only used to identify cocreators (research participants). It was not employed to analyze data—which we understand would have countered the aims and stipulations of Husserlian phenomenology (Peoples, 2020).

Research questions and aim

Our study sought to explicate the lived experience of CZ among professors. It was the aim of this study to develop textual and structural descriptions of CZ and its catalysts, as described by the cocreators. We focused on two research questions:

- (1) *What is the invariant structure of CZ?*
- (2) *How does the process of CZ begin?*

Expressed differently, we were interested in finding the *essence* of CZ (i.e., or what remains the same about the phenomena across contexts). Additionally, we sought to explicate how professors become aware of oppression and privilege as they relate to facets of their identity; and why this knowledge is so effective for some, they devote their careers to researching and teaching the subject.

Design

Phenomenology is not only a qualitative approach to inquiry, it is also a branch of philosophy. Therefore, to select the appropriate methodology, one must first select the philosophical phenomenological vein they wish to follow (Cresswell & Pott, 2018; Vagle, 2018). We decided to approach this study using Husserlian phenomenology, given it is one of the philosophical underpinnings of CZ. We therefore embarked on the path of descriptive phenomenology with its emphasis on the natural attitude and bracketing. This choice was made because of its rejection of assumptions, hypothesis, and theory in data analysis (Giorgi, 2009). We further narrowed the methodology to a fusion of Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994), as these approaches are clearly defined and complementary. We felt more prescriptive approaches would be easier to replicate in future studies.

As it was our desire to capture the experience of CZ from the cocreators' natural attitude (Vagle, 2018), we explored a descriptive phenomenological approach that integrated Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas's (1994) modifications of Vaan Kaam and Husserl. The purpose of this approach was to describe the invariant structure and catalysts of CZ. A composite structural description of CZ, as well as a composite textual-structural description of catalysts, will be provided in the Findings section.

Sample and recruitment

Our study involved seven White and African American cocreators, ranging in age from 35 to 82. For inclusion, one had to be a full-time tenure-track or clinical/term faculty member with a substantive area of expertise, either via teaching or research, in any form of hegemony (i.e., racism, classism, sexism, cis-sexism, homophobia, xenophobia or nationalism, ethnocentrism, tribalism, ableism, etc.) or contemporary critical theory in general. This sample was chosen given the likelihood that faculty teaching and researching in a domain of hegemony had undergone at least a portion of the CZ process. Since we were primarily concerned with the catalysts of CZ, this was an appropriate population from which the study sample could be recruited and selected. Also, this population was readily available, convenient, and provided a relatively homogenous group in regard to socioeconomic status and educational attainment.

Initially, we used purposive sampling; identifying and contacting known faculty with the above-listed areas of expertise. From the initial interviews we used snowball sampling, asking cocreators to identify and provide e-mail addresses for faculty that fit our inclusion criteria. All faculty, including those purposively sampled, were recruited via e-mail. For an overview of the sample's demographics—including the hegemonic systems each cocreator identified—see Table 1.

Table 1. Sample demographics: seven cocreators.

Name	Race	Gender	Age	Academic Department	Hegemonic Systems Identified
Dr. A	African American	Female	82	Anthropology, Ethnic Studies	Racism
Dr. B	White	Female	54	Education	Racism, sexism, classism
Dr. C	African American	Female	73	Social Work	Racism
Dr. D	African American	Female	42	Social Work	Racism, sexism, classism, religion, LGBTQ
Dr. E	African American	Male	35	Education	Racism, colorism and featurism, sexism, classism
Dr. F	White	Male	67	Social Work	Racism, sexism, classism, ethnocentrism
Dr. G	White	Male	44	Social Work	Racism, sexism, classism, religion, LGBTQ

Note. LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning.

Data collection and management

The first author conducted in-depth interviews, from within the epoché (i.e., withholding assumptions; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994), using a semistructured guide that heavily emphasized open-ended questions (see the Appendix). The guide was developed by the first author according to phenomenological methods for interviewing (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994) and included questions such as, “Tell me about your first experience of oppression or othering” and “What made you interested in your substantive area?” The individual interviews were collected in February 2020 and lasted between 55 minutes and 1.75 hours. In the beginning of each interview, before the recording commenced, cocreators were assigned a pseudonym to decrease their use of identifying information. The interviews were conducted in person, in the professors’ offices on their respective campuses, to ease cocreator burden and increase participation. Cocreators did not receive a financial incentive for participation in the study. The tape-recorded interviews were transported in a locked box to a password-protected computer for immediate upload to a third-party vendor for transcription. Once uploaded, the interviews were deleted from the recording device. Transcriptions received from the vendor were cleaned and further deidentified before analysis.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed by both authors using a whole-part-whole approach (Vagle, 2018) from within the phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The cleaned and deidentified transcripts were read in full to gain an understanding of the whole textual experience of CZ for each individual cocreator (Giorgi, 2009). Each transcript was then read again for the purpose of horizontalization, or delineating meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). The process of horizontalization entailed indexing each individual statement made by each individual cocreator that referred directly to CZ or the catalysts thereof. Once the meaning units for each participant were indexed, the statements were merged to create a composite index. The composite was then reduced to its invariant horizons or constituents by removing repetitive, vague, unnamable, or unnecessary statements (Moustakas, 1994). The invariant constituents, still in the natural attitude, were then translated into phenomenologically sensitive descriptions using Giorgi’s (2009) method of transformation. Transformation was conducted using imaginative variation (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The transformed statements were then organized into the composite structural and textural–structural descriptions presented in the Findings section.

Rigor

Multiple methods were used to establish and increase rigor within this study. First, an iterative data collection and analysis process rooted in descriptive phenomenological methodology was used (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). Second, in addition to data horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), invariant meaning transformation was exercised (Giorgi, 2009). Third, the developing descriptions of CZ and *catalysts* were revisited repeatedly; assessing the invariant horizons and

constituents against the data provided without “filling in the gaps” with supposition and conjecture (Giorgi, 2009). Quite simply, if it was not in the data, it did not exist; and if it could not be found across multiple experiences, it was not invariant.

Findings

Cocreators reported several hegemonic systems for which they were conscientized. These systems include: racism, colorism and featurism, sexism, homophobia, ethnocentrism, religious oppression, and classism. Additionally, several intersects of these systems were noted. Most often discussed was the intersection between race and gender. However, the intersections between gender and religion, and religion and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning issues were also illuminated. What follows is the composite structural description of CZ, the composite textural–structural description of *catalysts*, and a cocreator’s textural description of class-based CZ. A structural description is an amalgamation of all manifested themes in the study and is normally written in plain language (Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2020). A textural description is a summation of the specific experiences of cocreators and may include their direct quotes. A textural–structural description is a structural description with the occasional quotation or example for emphasis. These descriptions comprise the lived experience of all cocreators in the study and were developed inductively from the interview data using the methods previously described.

Composite structural description of conscientization

CZ is a lifelong process with three phases. The first phase, *gaining awareness*, entails becoming conscious of hegemonic systems (e.g., racism) that contribute to one’s own oppression or the oppression of others. This occurrence can be *epiphanic* (i.e., sudden and spontaneous) or *continuous* (i.e., growing and evolving slowly over time with no specific or identifiable beginning or end). This phase occurs subconsciously as one moves throughout the world encountering new people, places, and ideas. In this phase of the CZ process, one continuously builds their knowledge base through formal (i.e., K–12 topics, specific higher education courses, and trainings mandated for employment) and informal (i.e., summer or after-school programs, conversations with diverse groups of people, watching documentaries, leisure reading) means. These experiences help the person construct their ideals of right and wrong, as well as their conceptualizations of equity and injustice.

As one becomes increasingly exposed to a facet of a hegemonic system (e.g., the effect of racism on income inequality), and that facet contradicts their dominant discourses of self and society (e.g., the belief in meritocracy; and that all their privileges are earned), they must choose to acknowledge the disagreement between reality and their perception of reality. This is a conscious choice that is often decided against. Those who acknowledge the hegemonic system presenting itself are those who are already predisposed to critical analysis. Meaning, they are intrinsically inquisitive; and organically reflective in disposition or predilection.

The second phase, *concerted action*, involves acting on the knowledge acquired in the *gaining awareness* phase to combat injustice and inequality. This action is usually instinctual and extemporaneous, in that one witnesses an obvious act of discrimination and has a gut reaction that immediately addresses it (e.g., turning down a promotion after being told they are receiving it, over a person of color, because they are White). After this initial *action* occurs, the final phase, *intentionality*, begins.

Intentionality has three steps that repeat in no particular order. In the first, the person begins *reflecting* on the success or failure of their action. They analyze the situation—finding justification in the necessity of their response, by exploring what internal mechanisms prompted them to act. In the second step, they begin gathering new knowledge that helps further their understanding of the circumstances that precipitated their action (e.g., what it means to be White). This is different than the *gaining awareness* phase, as this knowledge is purposefully and selectively sought out through formal

and informal means. In this step, one seeks to understand the hegemonic system as a whole; or, more information on the specific facet they encountered. Often, the first and second steps occur simultaneously, as one could reflect on their action while asking a person they respect for their opinion.

In the third and final step of phase 3, they act again. However, now the actions are focused and intentional. These *intentional actions* can take many different forms on a micro, mezzo, and macro plane. Micro actions include: inviting a colleague of color to dinner, adding social justice topics to research agendas, publishing in journals created for and edited by minorities, or introducing course materials from underrepresented voices. Sometimes, even the seeking of knowledge can be considered an intentional action. Mezzo actions can take the form of organizational policy analyses and reviews for implicit bias, participating in (or forming) the diversity committee, participating in diversity campaigns across the institution, or intentionally hiring faculty and staff who hail from (or hold membership in) underrepresented minority groups. Macro actions materialize on grander scales—such as voter registration outreach in difficult to reach communities; community initiatives that benefit specific underserved populations, or lobbying for laws and social policies that create opportunities for equity and justice.

Composite textural–structural description of catalysts

There are two types of catalyst for the CZ process—*continuous* and *epiphanic*. A continuous catalyst occurs when one has an ever-present awareness of a system of hegemony, before being formally or informally notified of said system explicitly. Meaning, one has no recollection of themselves not bound to a particular oppressed population. They simply cannot fathom themselves, or their circumstance, removed from belonging to the subordinate group of a hegemonic system; and therefore has never known themselves to be free of the implications of said system in thought or operation. The presence of said system, or a facet thereof, has been indissoluble, inextricable, and indistinguishable from their socialization. Therefore, it is imbedded in their identity and thus their experience of life. Accordingly, it becomes difficult to identify and analyze any one instance of oppression related to that specific hegemonic system, or facet of that system, because their entire life appears to be one continuous example of oppression related to that system. In corollary, their seeking of knowledge related to the hegemonic system that encompasses every aspect of their being and existing in the world, serves as evidence of their lived experience; and provides language by which to name, discuss, and eventually eradicate the hegemonic system.

The only examples of continuous catalysts observed came for Black cocreators and their descriptions of racial CZ. For example, Dr. C viewed her desire to anthropologically study Black peoples as “a natural outgrowth” of being reared by a “very Black” family while living in a predominantly White neighborhood. Dr. A, who came from a politically conscious and well-educated family, also stated it to be “natural” for her to go to college for the express purpose of “bettering the situation of the people.” Overall, none of the Black cocreators had an epiphanic catalyst to racial conscientization.

The epiphanic catalyst occurs as one becomes aware of a system of hegemony, or facet thereof, suddenly from a meaningful educational or experiential event. There is no intuitive knowing, or conscious acknowledgment, of the hegemonic system before being formally educated about it; or experiencing a disruptive life event that forces one to question the status quo in relation to it. Therefore, the life experiences of those who fall into this catalyst category can be dichotomized into two periods of time—*before* and *after*. The first period (before) is described as a state of naïveté, ignorance, and obliviousness. Those in the before period are often “good people” or even “good liberals” who were regarded as “nice” and “respectful” by friends and colleagues. However, although they have a considerable number of “good relationships,” they “do not entirely understand” or wholly appreciate the diversity of lived experiences coloring their interpersonal interactions.

The second period (after) can be understood as the CZ process on repeat. They begin to understand the initial exposed facet of a hegemonic system—and this understanding leads them to explore within that system, encountering new knowledge as they progress. Or, they confront an adjacent facet of

a differing hegemonic system that presents itself in close relation to the system they were initially coming to know. Following this course, multiple CZ processes—for multiple hegemonic systems—begin and progress consecutively and concurrently, in tandem with and in opposition to one another. There were many examples of epiphanic catalysts throughout this study—and from each cocreator. However, the most consistent examples came for cocreators who were members of a dominant group as they learned of the hegemonic system they actively or inactively help to maintain.

Experiences of epiphanic catalysts were described by all participants in the study. Dr. F reported attending a job training on racism (later in his career) where he was asked when he first knew he was White. Up until that point, he had never considered his race and immediately began to question why that was—beginning the racial CZ process. Another example comes from Dr. D, who was invited to the first sermon of a respected female mentor. Dr. D was raised to believe it was a sin for women to preach over men. However, because of her great respect for the mentor, she attended the service. This event began a religious CZ process; and planted the seeds for gender-based CZ almost 10 years later. It is then clearly represented in the data that most people do have an epiphanic catalyst into CZ processes. This occurs regardless of their identity fitting into the dominant or subordinate group of hegemony to which they are being conscientized.

Textural description of conscientization: Dr. F

An illustration of the CZ process was offered by Dr. F in which he described the experience of learning of poverty—in particular his own. He was in high school and had a newspaper route. He recounted looking into the houses of people from whom he went to collect money—realizing they had much more than he did. Up until that point, he thought everyone in his town “ate the same government cheese” because “everyone had lost their job” when the local coal mine closed. Seeing the possessions of various people on his route—as well as who could pay and who could not—changed that notion for him. He continued observing the differences of income around him—gradually increasing his awareness of inequality. He went to college in the South, and observed the intersection of classism and ageism. This prompted him to major in social work. After college, he began his career working with impoverished communities—particularly the elderly. This example illustrates how Dr. F experienced an epiphanic catalyst to a hegemonic system to which he was subjected—demonstrating how rare it actually is to have a continuous catalyst. This example also illustrates how investigating one domain of oppression (i.e., classism) can expose one to another domain of oppression (i.e., ageism).

Discussion

This study sought to describe the lived experience of CZ among the professorate. We also strived to explicate the educational and experiential catalysts of CZ. Cocreators in this study were full-time professors and recognized as experts in various hegemonic systems. A composite structural description of CZ and a composite textural–structural description of *catalysts* was presented. The descriptions were developed using a fusion of descriptive phenomenological methodologies. These included Moustakas’s (1994) van Kaam modification and Giorgi’s (2009) modification of Husserl. We chose these specific methodologies of phenomenology as they relate closely to the phenomenological underpinnings of CZ, in addition to providing structure for replication and future research.

Connections to prior research

The data revealed the lived experience of CZ is very similar to the definitions of CZ provided by Freire (1970/1998, 1970/2018). It includes many of the themes and components of CZ, including: generative themes, limit-situations, limit-actions, praxis, and the three levels of consciousness Freire proposed—

semi-intransitive, transitive, and critical (Freire, 1970/1998, 1970/2013, 1970/2018). Therefore, although this study was not meant to validate or confirm CZ as a theory, our results do support Freire's original postulations. Of course, the fact that this study buttresses Freire should not be an unexpected or astonishing event to most, because Freire's assertions were in fact rooted in his experiences teaching peasant adults how to read in Brazil—inklings of his theory and critique can even be found in his 1959 dissertation (Gadotti, 1994). CZ therefore did have some empirical foundation. However, it is revitalizing to have a recent study, rooted in data, that supports his original declarations. This counters the recent suggestion that CZ is in some way inadequate and in need of replacement by more modern theories (Jemal, 2017). Thus, scholars could benefit from returning to the basics of CZ theory to gain a fuller understanding of the pedagogical approach and its accompanying methodology.

In regard to catalysts, we observed that the CZ processes across domains were very similar. Additionally, the impetus for CZ of those holding dominant or subordinate group memberships also paralleled—with the exception of race. This study builds on the idea that some experience CZ as an epiphany (Berta-Ávila, 2003; Landreman et al., 2007). To some extent, this contradicts Freire's (1970/2013) insinuation that it is rare to find someone with a semi-intransitive consciousness. Although not all cocreators in the study fit neatly into this structure for every hegemonic system to which they became conscientized, each cocreator did have an epiphanic catalyst. On the other hand, only Black cocreators experienced a continuous catalyst—and only in relation to their racial CZ. However, the entire *catalysts* structure seems to support Mezirow's (1978, 1991) process of transformational learning—which is almost identical to CZ in description. Mezirow (1978) originally hypothesized that transformational learning, which CZ is, begins through the introduction of a disorienting dilemma.

In 1991, Mezirow suggested an accumulation of life events could also propel one into the transformational learning process; and this is supported by our findings and the description of *continuous catalysts* presented. However, as presented in the findings section, this sort of catalyst is rare—even among those who belong to subordinate groups. In light of these findings, more research is needed to further assess the CZ process, as well as the distinctions and unique variations amid varied hegemonic systems. As this study illuminated, catalysts of CZ were often similar for cocreators, except in the realm of race. More research is needed to explore these variations in the CZ process, as well as among varying populations (e.g., students).

Limitations

In the practice of reflexivity, the interviewer is an African American woman. While this is by no means a limitation, and many would consider it a fringe benefit, we would be remiss not to question whether or not her race and gender played a role in the abundance of hegemonic system acknowledgments related to race and gender. In corollary, although Dr. D did briefly mention being able-bodied as a form of privilege, none of the cocreators delved deeply into this topic. However, as with all phenomenological studies, researcher's aims and cocreator's positionality contribute heavily to what descriptions manifest in data. Additionally, phenomenological analysis—just as with all qualitative and quantitative analysis—brings with it the researcher's assumptions (Cresswell & Pott, 2018). While the practice of bracketing was used, there is no such thing as complete objectivity. Also, the nature of phenomenological methodology has specific limitations in regard to transferability to other settings and generalizability to a populace (Cresswell & Pott, 2018). Last, CZ could benefit from further qualitative inquiry using various approaches. Perhaps constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) would be appropriate, as its purpose is theory and model development—something of which the field of CZ is in need.

Implications and recommendations

This study has implications for social scientists across domains of oppression and academic discipline. Specifically, this study can lessen confusion between and unify the fields of education, social work, psychology, sociology, public health, economics, history, anthropology, ethnic studies, and political science. Knowing how individuals begin and continue to experience the CZ process is invaluable to students and educators. We focus the implications of our findings toward social work, given the social justice orientation of the field and the underlying importance of CZ to current and future social workers. Understanding the development of CC is crucial for social workers' development into successful antioppressive practitioners and researchers (Freire, 1985). Additionally, it is necessary for schools of social work and their educators to recognize the CZ process to facilitate and guide students through all three phases of CZ.

Knowledge of CZ may help educators to develop and integrate specific techniques into their classrooms that initiate a lifelong CZ process for students. Examples of techniques previously identified in the literature include asking open-ended questions that encourage reflection on one's oppressed and privileged identities, including course materials from underrepresented voices that evoke an emotive response, giving extra credit points for participation in activities that increase students' exposure to diverse populations, and assigning at least one social justice project per course. These suggestions are consistent with previous pedagogical approaches designed to raise CC (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2016; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). For example, Pitner and Sakamoto (2016) suggested several approaches to developing CC in the classroom, including: positive learning environments, mindfulness-based pedagogy, and classroom assignments that center and decenter one's worldview, such as an identity paper and constructing a world map. Additionally, Pitner and Sakamoto (2016) discussed the role of the instructor and the egalitarian classroom environment as important contributors to establishing CC. Our data reinforce and extend previous findings by identifying the important role formal and informal education have on the development of CC.

Universities often claim to value experiential education. However, given the normative orientation and culture of schools, they often reinforce the dominant ideology, and diminish informal forms of education (Cabrera, 2018; Reyes, 2018). A path forward to help educators develop the CC of their students must promote avenues of critique and diversity in opinions, as well as building respect and collaboration across formal and informal education (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Connell, 2019). While it is important for educators to teach, it is equally important for them to hear the voice of their students, and this counterhegemonic pedagogy may be crucial to stimulating the CZ process (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Educators must move beyond the abstract construction of social transformation by helping students engage in action-oriented tasks that challenge the dominant norms and disrupt oppressive institutional forces (Camangian, 2017). Increases in CC attainment may be likely if both experience and formal education are present and connected. Therefore, if academic institutions partner with community programs in addressing specific facets of hegemonic systems, they will likely produce greater CC levels than if they were to work independently. Future research should explore to what extent educating institutions facilitate catalysts and learning across all three phases of CZ.

This study can also aid in the development and implementation of consciousness-raising programs housed within academic institutions and social service agencies alike. This begins by acknowledging that someone is not likely to have undergone a CZ process simply by virtue of their membership in an oppressed group—which will help bridge the gap in knowledge and experience between teachers and students, or practitioners and clients. Specifically, this study can assist with developing or reformulating the curricula for such programs to evoke critical reflection and prompt critical action. For example, a program targeted at increasing financial literacy in minority communities could discuss redlining and other governmental policies that contributed to the widespread divestment and poverty that many communities of color experience. Not only would this increase the participants' financial literacy, it would also increase their awareness of financial discrimination—as well as the means by which to oppose it.

Herein, several recommendations are outlined.

- (1) First, schools of social work must universally house social justice and diversity courses. This recommendation may seem rudimentary; however, the inconsistency and variability in whether these courses exist, and the extent to which they focus on the development of CC, is unknown. Teasley and Archuleta (2015) suggested more transparency in syllabi to aid in the promotion of social justice competencies. Syllabi consistency can help to build cohesion and illuminate methodological and pedagogical transparency across institutions and professors.
- (2) In corollary with recommendation one, social justice components and classroom efforts to develop critical consciousness should be emphasized throughout all courses. As noted in our findings, because CZ may vary by domain—the process may entail lifelong learning—one that does not start and stop within a social justice and diversity classroom. For instance, a professor or student may develop CC with regard to one domain (e.g., race), but may be more resistant to CZ in another area (e.g., gender, politics). This is especially noticeable given the recent debates surrounding critical race theory, with rhetoric being hurled from each end of the political spectrum. When we consider the development of CC for students, we must strive for inclusivity built from a foundation of antioppressive practice. This means respecting and acknowledging the diversity of students' political ideologies, alongside efforts to educate inclusively across varied student identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender).
- (3) We recommend the expansion of the techniques offered by Pitner and Sakamoto (2016). Specifically, their call for positive learning environments must be supported by sincere and compassionate relationships between teachers and students, as well as between students. The process of CZ will be hampered in environments where inclusivity is absent. This can be achieved by placing greater value on the well-being and mental health of students. Subsequently, student learning will develop as a corollary to a supportive, compassionate social work classroom. In consideration of an inclusive classroom where healthy relationships are emphasized, techniques of social justice pedagogy can be optimized. Further, as relationships are emphasized, the ability to think critically without fear of repercussions or accusations can be absolved, ultimately in aid of deeper, more productive discussions. This is especially important in today's increasingly polarizing society. As we strive to deliver the values of social justice pedagogy, we have to constantly self-assess. Do our actions in the classroom align with our values of social justice?

Conclusion

Our research explored the process of CZ through a descriptive phenomenological study of professors working toward combating oppression. We outlined three phases of CZ, in addition to showcasing catalysts of the CZ process. Our findings have implications for social work educators and other educational institutions aimed at ameliorating oppressive forces. Understanding the mechanisms of CZ, and identifying how this process develops, is crucial to shaping future antioppressive students, researchers, and practitioners.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Preamble

Hello, my name is _____ and I am one of the researchers investigating the phenomenon of conscientization within subject-matter experts. Conscientization is the process of becoming aware or learning to perceive social, economic, or political disparities within our lives and subsequently take action against the oppressive elements that limit our full self-actualization. I'll be asking you questions today about your learning experiences with oppression and privilege for the purpose of creating a process model.

As already discussed in the consent form, our session will be recorded; this will allow me to transcribe what you've said and analyze it, along with the other interviews I complete. Nothing will be identifiable to you personally; there will be no way to trace any statement back to you as an individual. May I turn the recorder on?

1. Tell me about yourself. This is for the purpose of demographics. (Age. Sex. Education. SES. Religion. Family History. Marital Status)

2. Tell me about your substantive area or primary research interest?
 1. What made you interested in your substantive area?

 2. Were there any personal events that made you aware of your substantive area?

3. Tell me about your first experience of oppression or othering?
 1. How did you respond to this situation? Did it color the way you responded to subsequent similar encounters?

 2. Have you ever witnessed this type of event happening to others? What did you do in that situation? Do you wish you could have done something differently?

 3. Thinking back, how did you think about this experience over time? (pack it away or revisit often) Is this your normal tendency? Why?

4. What do you think is the interplay between education and experience as it pertains to the events you just described?

For the purpose of clarity, the researchers have separated operationalizations of hegemony into different domains such as racism, classism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and ableism. Which domain do you think the experience you previously described falls within?

4. Do you feel this is the most pressing domain of oppression in your life? Why? Why not?

5. Do you feel that you are privileged in a domain that other people may be oppressed in?

1. How does having privilege make you feel?

2. Have you sought to understand the experiences of those who feel oppressed in this domain? Were these learning opportunities sought out, or did they come to you without you asking for them? Can you describe your thinking before you found out about___?

6. Let's take a moment to reflect on our conversation. Do you think there were any aha moments that lead to your awakening? Do you think there were any moments that delayed your growth? Did you ever feel crazy or question your sanity during your awaking process?

7. Are there any other thoughts you want to share?

8. Is there anything you'd like to ask me?

Quick Notes: