

Critical Dialogue Developing Critical Consciousness: The Cornerstone of Social Work Group
Practice

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Abstract

There has been an increased focus on addressing health inequities through interventions that utilize critical consciousness and community organizing. However, little guidance has been provided on how to incorporate critical dialogue about oppression to develop critical consciousness as a therapeutic tool to mobilize marginalized groups in addressing social determinants of health and other sociopolitical inequities implicated in personal and interpersonal distress. This paper describes the critical dialogue component of an innovative, manualized, multilevel, behavioral health, group intervention, *Community Wise*. *Community Wise* consists of 15, two-hour group sessions, delivered weekly and designed to reduce substance use frequency, HIV/HCV risk behaviors, and reoffending among formerly incarcerated individuals by increasing critical consciousness in the community. *Community Wise* uses critical dialogue to develop critical consciousness. The critical dialogue sessions consist of group meetings where formerly incarcerated individuals with a history of substance use disorder reflect and engage in dialogue to develop a deeper understanding of how marginalizing processes (e.g., structural and internalized racism, sexism, classism) impact their lives and behavior. This paper details the critical dialogue intervention component illustrated by quotes and examples extracted from voice recordings of intervention groups conducted during the pilot test of *Community Wise*. This paper provides a descriptive guide for clinicians and the requisite facilitation tools to add the critical dialogue component to any social work group practice.

Keywords: critical consciousness, critical dialogue, facilitation, African-American, community-based participatory research, intervention

CRITICAL DIALOGUE

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Using the critical dialogue component of *Community Wise* as an example, this paper is written to provide a descriptive guide for social workers to facilitate critical dialogue sessions. Grounded in community based participatory research (CBPR) principles and critical consciousness theory (Freire, 2000; Israel et al., 2010), a group of 20 service providers, community members, researchers, and policy makers, known as the Newark Community Collaborative Board (NCCB), developed and pilot-tested *Community Wise*, a multilevel behavioral health intervention. *Community Wise* consists of 15 two-hour, weekly group sessions, designed to reduce substance use frequency, HIV/HCV risk behaviors, and reoffending by increasing critical consciousness in the community (NCCB website; Windsor et al., 2015). Critical consciousness is defined by educator Paulo Freire (2000) as the ability to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 19). *Community Wise* seeks to redirect the effects of marginalization away from self-destructive behavior and toward more outward, positive social action, such as planting a community garden and/or advocating for community resources.

Community Wise uses facilitated critical dialogue to develop participants’ critical consciousness grounded in the group work, critical thinking, and critical consciousness literature (Windsor et al., 2018; Windsor, Jemal, & Benoit, 2014). Critical dialogue is a group dialogue that uses critical questions informed by critical consciousness theory and critical thinking to challenge deeply held beliefs, assess community problems, and develop action plans to address the problems. Some of the facilitator’s duties are to cultivate an environment for healthy risk-taking, to develop a co-learning relationship with participants, and to pose critical questions that make the implicit, oppressive factors, visible (i.e., problematization). Facilitators of *Community Wise* are not experts or teachers who have hierarchical roles. This paper: 1) introduces critical

dialogue and the tools used to develop critical dialogue from the literature; 2) details the development of the *Community Wise* intervention to show how *Community Wise* incorporated acritical dialogue component; 3) provides a qualitative exploration of the critical dialogue sessions used in the first pilot test of the intervention through the proposed framework of transformative consciousness; and 4) suggests practice guidelines for group work that incorporates facilitated critical dialogue.

Critical Dialogue Overview

Critical dialogue is one component of *Community Wise* that seemed particularly transforming and has been noted in the literature as a key tool for developing critical consciousness (Jemal, 2017a; Windsor, Jessell, Lassiter, & Benoit, 2015). Critical dialogue consists of group meetings where participants reflect on historical/sociopolitical contexts and engage in dialogue to develop a deeper understanding of how marginalizing processes (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) impact their lives and behavior (Windsor et al., 2014; Diemer et al., 2006). The critical dialogue component incorporates: purposefully developed pictographs, reflective questioning, co-learning, and the group process.

Pictographs. An important element of Freire's pedagogy consisted of pictographs that were commissioned by Freire to depict specific messages and generate dialogue where students were encouraged by a facilitator to react to the pictographs. The goal was to encourage the problematization of working conditions, exploitation of labor, and uncover unequal power distributions and resource ownership by posing questions to the group about the image. For instance, in a pictograph, a rural worker holds an empty book. The facilitator asks questions such as: Why is the book empty? Does the man have knowledge? Who owns the knowledge? How is

knowledge passed from one person to another? What is the purpose of a book? These questions were designed to help participants verbalize their own thoughts about the importance of reading and writing in connection with the ownership and the transmission of knowledge (Freire, 1978).

Reflective questioning. One tool to promote critical reflection through dialogue is the posing of reflective questions. Reflective questions direct attention to power dynamics involved in various systems that maintain systemic inequity (Garcia et al., 2009). Examples of such questions may include: "Where does knowledge of dysfunctional families come from and how do class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability inform the dynamics of this system?" (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 32). Reflective questions allow exploration of how "knowledge is created and maintained by larger sociopolitical forces" (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 32). Questions provoke discussions about the status quo, promote the ability to analyze or identify the meaning of experiences and events, and then elicit how participants would improve the situation or take action promoting social justice (Watts et al., 2002).

Co-learning. Freire (2000), through problem-posing education, revolutionized the teacher-student relationship by emphasizing co-learner, non-hierarchical, respectful relationships between students and teachers. Within the consciousness-raising process, students and teachers are co-learners and active in a process of co-constructing knowledge through multi-methods and dialogical means (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002). The teachers are viewed as facilitators who model challenging ideas, values, and assumptions perpetuated by the dominant social order (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002). The facilitator's role is to empower students through an egalitarian relationship with learners and offer advice and support in a non-directive way (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002). Likewise, rigidly authoritarian rules, didactic teaching methods

that reduce opportunity for autonomy and critical thinking are contrary and prohibitive of the critical consciousness development process (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002).

Group participation and process. Some scholars consider the need for small group discussions and interactions as an important tool to facilitate critical consciousness development (Jemal, 2017a). Intra-group interaction and communication have been identified as empowerment techniques that have strong influence on behavior and perception of reality (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991). For the group process to be successful, listening, humility respect and critique are needed elements to allow the group to problematize repetitive oppressive aspects of everyday lived experience (Watts et al., 2011). Gutierrez and Ortega (1991, p. 30) identified a five phase group process of critical consciousness development: “(a) recognition of member similarities to enhance group identity; (b) the development of common goals; (c) identification of obstacles or barriers to self and group expression, (d) exploration and generation of ideas to address identified obstacles and barriers and (e) planning action steps.” Group participation seems to allow a combination of tools to be utilized for consciousness-raising such as encouraging dialogue that promotes reflective questioning about the connections between personal and societal issues, the use of role plays and other participatory activities; grounding discussions within the daily, shared realities of those involved in the consciousness-raising process; co-constructing new and empowered understandings and identities; and identifying potential solutions to local problems (Hatcher, 2010). The group process allows participants to engage in the social comparison process and feel comfortable sharing common problems and struggles; helping them perceive group commonalities and a shared fate in which they are not alone (Freire, 2000; Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991). Critical dialogue about common experiences helps participants combat isolation and receive social support (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991).

Small groups also encourage a constructive group process in which participants are allowed the time and given encouragement to create a physically and psychologically safe space that permits participants to explore connections between personal and socio-political problems (Ginwright & James, 2002). Participants “move from consciousness of themselves as oppressed individuals to the consciousness of an oppressed class” (Freire, 2000, p. 174). This way they develop a group identity, a sense of community, and obtain support from others who are also struggling (Hatcher et al., 2010). Once the group process identifies shared experiences and commonalities, participants can begin to delineate solutions targeted at the sociopolitical roots of their micro experiences (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991; Watts et al., 2011). According to Gutierrez and Ortega (1991, p. 26), “[e]mpowerment theory assumes that if individuals understand the connectedness of human experience they will be more likely to work with others to alter social conditions.” The group process is a critical factor in the development of critical consciousness and is empowering, because cohesive groups involved in critical thinking and sociopolitical action have a strong influence on individual behavior and perception, and ultimately, identity (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991).

The empowering group process that incorporates a sense of belonging has the potential to lead to mobilizing activities and collective action that promotes the common good over efforts towards individual achievement (Hatcher, 2010). Group participation, with safety in numbers, provides ideal environment for engaging in constructive risk-taking behavior which can allow for development of new attitudes, beliefs, and possibilities for social change (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991). Empowering the silenced to find their collective voice and liberate themselves is the overarching goal of consciousness-raising (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991); or, as Hardy-Fanta (1986, p. 123) describes, having “competent people working toward achieving their own ends through

collective action.” To accomplish similar goals, Watts, Abdul-Adil, and Pratt (2002) and Windsor and colleagues (2014) have considered interventions that incorporate a process of civic learning in which participants develop critical consciousness and community action projects that use participant-generated insights to change social systems.

Intervention Development

Grounded in community based participatory research (CBPR), the Newark Community Collaborative Board (NCCB) developed and pilot-tested *Community Wise*. Following CBPR principles, the NCCB met over the course of 1 year to receive training, engage in dialogue about community problems and solutions, and develop an action plan. Informed by an ethnographic study, a needs assessment, existing literature, and board members’ experiential knowledge, the NCCB identified HIV prevention, reentry, and substance misuse as some of the main challenges facing the city of Newark. Inspired by Freire’s pictographs, a committee was charged to conduct focus groups with reentry, substance misuse, and HIV prevention experts, consumers (those with lived experiences in these areas), and service providers to understand marginalizing processes that keep people with histories of incarceration and substance use oppressed.

Thematic analysis of the ethnographic data revealed five central themes: 1) Solar System: The power distribution in communities that create resources and pitfall for people transitioning from incarceration into the community; 2) Funhouse Mirrors: The distorted images of themselves and their lives that people often see when they face themselves in the mirror. These images are influenced by cultural norms rooted by racism, classism, and sexism; 3) Walls: The macro level systems (such as welfare, criminal justice, education) that maintain the status quo; 4) Family: Images of the American dream and what a happy family should be and look like; and 5)

Historical Trauma: The legacy of slavery and how it continues to influence our worldviews and behaviors today. The NCCB finalized the themes.

Ideas for images to depict the themes were developed under CBPR principles and through focus groups with people knowledgeable about the oppression faced by people with histories of substance use disorder and incarceration residing in distressed communities. The thematic analysis findings from the focus groups were translated into illustrations designed to elicit reactions from group participants. A national competition was launched to invite artists who could work with the NCCB in translating the themes into images that contained a take home message reflecting each theme. The images can be used for marginalized substance use and reentry. Different images could be created to adapt critical dialogue to other conditions. Artists were asked to illustrate the historical trauma theme in a sketch that was presented and reviewed by the NCCB. The NCCB then invited the artist who drafted the winning sketch to complete a full painting of each theme. The sketch for each theme was presented to the NCCB and modifications were requested from the artist before the full painting was developed. Once the sessions were pilot tested, the NCCB realized that a critical issue had been overlooked: sexism / heterosexism and health. Thus, we developed a sixth theme - *Boys and girls, and ...* - to display the impact of gender norms and sexual preferences on the marginalization of sexual minorities. Below we include each image, its description, and the take home messages.

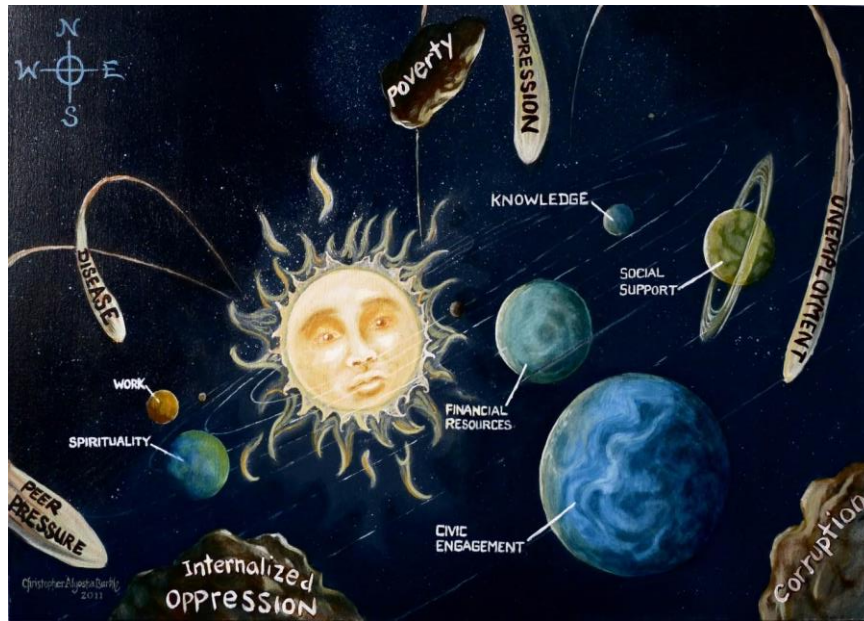
Solar System

Illustration description: The sun is at the center representing the individual. It is surrounded by planets representing different resources and by meteors representing different threats. Resources include other community members (friendship), organizations (churches, health clinics, government agencies, police), 911, employment, civic engagement (such as protesting together), and democracy. Threats include extreme religious beliefs, criminal behaviors, violence, gangs, indifference, substance use, HIV/ HCV risk behaviors, attitude (self-defeating behaviors), corrupt politicians, and the police. The planets are moving around the sun in an elliptical shape so that sometimes a planet comes close to the sun, and sometimes it is far from the sun. A compass sits in a corner representing the different sections of the community.

Illustration description: A person of color stands sad and confused in the middle of a circle of funhouse mirrors. This person sees their images in the mirrors as people addicted to drugs, sharing needles, engaging in risky sex, robbing people, fighting with their family members, abusing their children, feeling depressed. These images are being projected by the media and society.

Take home Message: Our brains are like sponges. They absorb the images, language, and actions of our environments. Sometimes we may pick up messages that make us feel bad, even if we know the message is not true. These messages may make us feel angry and sad. In internalizing and adopting the oppressive culture, we become tools of social control ourselves, thus contributing to ecological inequalities. In recognizing internalized privilege and oppression, we can create an alternative culture, and a new, self-developed identity while funneling anger toward public engagement. *Critical Dialogue* aims to use anger as a motivating and constructive force for social change.

Walls



Illustration description: A group of individuals of all races and genders stand surrounded by see-through walls, trying to break free from them. On one corner a man and a woman are successfully climbing over the wall by holding on to a lifeline that has been thrown to them by

their community members who are on the other side. These walls represent the criminal justice system, the school system, child protective services, housing programs, and welfare.

Take home Message: The oppressive culture is embedded in institutions and structures of social control. These mechanisms of social control are like invisible walls that impede people from moving forward. The walls distort the way society and oppressed individuals perceive one another. The best way to overcome the walls is through community action.

Historical Trauma



Illustration description: An African man and an African woman have recently arrived in North America, captured to work as slaves. They are scared, confused, angry, and defiant. They still hold the memory of their culture, their tribe, and their families. A White man and lighter skin Black man who work for wealthy White farmers bully the Africans and prepare them to be sold. A pregnant Black woman who has been a slave her entire life, stands defeated in the corner. She has no connections to Africa, and no knowledge about the history of her ancestors. She is demoralized, dehumanized, and powerless. The wealthy White farmer's home is displayed, representing White power and privilege. A Black horse in the corner represents the defiant,

strong, fighting spirit, struggling to break free from its captor.

Take Home Message: African culture was stolen and distorted during slavery, leading to intergenerational trauma. Today, many African Americans have adopted a westernized oppressive culture as their own. Many have spent their lives, and sometimes given their lives, to fight against the oppressive culture (e.g. Sojourner Truth; Martin Luther King).

Families and Relationships

Illustration description: This is a snapshot of a happy, traditional White middle class



family in their suburban home with their dog. The family is displayed first, posing for a perfect illustration. In the background one sees the house, the car and the beautiful American dream.

Also, in the background a Black gardener works in the yard and a Black maid works by the house.

Take Home Message: Historical trauma is transmitted inter-generationally through family relationships. Controlling images and unreachable standards are powerful tools in the maintenance of the status quo. By redefining family, family norms, and setting more realistic expectations, people can combat oppression and privilege.

Boys and girls and...

Illustration description: The image includes several panels displaying images designed to elicit a discussion about gender roles, homophobia, sexism, and health. The first panel displays a boy playing with dolls and a girl playing with cars & trucks; Second panel shows 2 women holding hands; Third panel shows 2 men holding hands; Fourth panel shows a heterosexual couple; and Fifth panel shows a doctor's office with a doctor holding a medical report.

Take Home Message: We absorb the images, language and actions of our environments. Sometimes we may pick up messages about gender and sexual identity that make us feel ashamed, even if we know the messages are not true. In internalizing and adopting the oppressive culture, we become tools of social control ourselves, thus contributing to the oppressive system. In addition, internalized oppression based on sexism and homophobia can increase the likelihood that people will not value themselves and will engage in health risk behaviors.

Homework

One of the goals in critical consciousness raising is to merge experiential and scientific knowledge. In order to reinforce the group discussion, ethnographic studies relevant to the weekly topic are summarized and assigned as homework. Participants are asked to read the assigned article over the week and come prepared to discuss their reactions and how the assignment related to the previous week's image that was discussed.

In *Community Wise*, the critical dialogue generated between group members by the pictographs is to develop critical consciousness. The following proposed framework for critical consciousness development provides a way to explore critical consciousness development within the first iteration and pilot testing of the *Community Wise* groups. The use of this framework for the purposes of highlighting group work facilitation is not evidence that this framework is or has been empirically tested.

Critical Consciousness Development

As previously noted, critical dialogue within the *Community Wise* session was intended to develop critical consciousness. A proposed process of critical consciousness development is used to qualitatively explore the critical dialogue sessions from the first pilot test of the *Community Wise* intervention. Transformative consciousness is a construct grounded in critical consciousness theory that identifies three levels of consciousness: non-critical/denial, blame, and critical consciousness (Jemal, 2018). Transformative Consciousness development relates to the individual's own transformation from uncritical (i.e., denial and blame) to critical levels of consciousness within the transformative consciousness framework. The development of critical consciousness invites people to move through a series of hypothesized stages and levels of consciousness (see Table 1) to increase their transformative potential, culminating in critical action. Ideally, the person resolves the struggle of how they will choose to exist in this world in

accordance with their new beliefs aligned with their level of consciousness.

Table 1.

Levels and Stages of Transformative Consciousness Development

Levels of Transformative Consciousness	Stages of Transformative Consciousness	Nature of Transformative Consciousness Development
Level 1: Non-Critical / Denial	Stage 1: Blind Belief	The individual's beliefs are unexamined. Information that supports beliefs is synthesized as confirmatory evidence while contradictory information is categorized as faulty or ignored. Individuals actively deny or are unaware of non-individual level influences.
	Stage 2: Discovery	The individual develops increased awareness that there are other perspectives that can be precipitated by a confrontation or challenge and is conflicted about exchanging beliefs. The individual may discover non-individual level, contributing factors. .
Level 2: Pre-Critical Blame/Credit	Stage 3: Duality	The individual attempts to find ways to hold countering beliefs while struggling to retain pre-existing beliefs in the face of contradicting information or experience. Thoughts about sociopolitical context may dual with learned ideas and values about individuals.
	Stage 4: Contemplation	The person learns that beliefs have a beginning and can have an end. The person contemplates the impact of their consciousness. They differentiate between beliefs and determine which beliefs to keep and

		which to discard.
Level 3: Critical Consciousness	Stage 5: Integration	Individuals come to evaluate old and new ideas and integrates new and old ways of thinking that informs action.
	Stage 6: Liberation	Based on the integration of new and old ideas, micro and macro factors, the individual is no longer a prisoner to their own thinking and can discern the roots of their thinking and the factors influencing consciousness and action. “This liberation phase allows the person to transform from object to subject (Freire, 1970), as they perceive and pursue their capacity to act upon, create, and transform their world rather than be acted upon as an object” (Jemal, 2018, p. 210).

The goal of transformative work is to move from lower levels of TC to critical TC.

Critical dialogue is a tool that facilitates transformative growth to critical consciousness (Jemal, 2018). The *Community Wise* critical dialogue sessions provide a glimpse into the facilitation of critical dialogue that facilitates participants’ progression through the stages of critical consciousness development.

Critical Dialogue in Practice: A Brief Qualitative Exploration

To explore critical dialogue as a tool for developing critical consciousness, voice-recorded *Community Wise* sessions were examined to identify examples of dialogue, group facilitation and critical questions that illustrate the critical dialogue intervention. It is important to reiterate that this section is not a report of data analysis results, but rather an examination of

facilitator's notes and facilitated critical dialogue within group social work practice. The third and fourth authors, MSW-level social workers who have facilitated *Community Wise* sessions, reviewed the recordings using the transformative consciousness framework as a guide to organize the dialogue by level of transformative consciousness. This organization allowed facilitation tools to emerge. Critical questions allowed participants to critically reflect on self, community, and how personal experiences reflect socio-political contexts. One group's co-facilitator expressed their belief and noted:

One unique direction the session took was the exploration of how the women contribute to oppression themselves. It was nice to see them owning their own prejudices and talking about ways to change that. Women were talking about perspectives, changing their minds, and challenging their own assumptions.

(Group 3: LW co-facilitator assessment)

The facilitator's critical questions and/or comments are a key component for critical dialogue. The questions point the discussion toward critical thinking rather than debate. Critical questions also combat belief baiting.

Level One Non-Critical. Facilitator questions the automatic nature of participants' beliefs to uncover the blind nature that participants have regarding their accepted beliefs and to highlight that they may have disregarded conflicting information and only accepted information that supports their beliefs.

Stage 1 Blind Belief. The first stage is blind belief. When the individual takes what they know as all-being. Beliefs are unconscious and automatic. The subconscious mind generates resistance when retained information and knowledge from past experiences conflicts with the

new information and/or experience being presented. Information that confirms belief system is automatically accepted and never questioned.

Facilitator: “What are the institutions that hold you back today? Who created them?”

Participant: “Us, Us!”

Facilitator: “Say you have someone who is selling everything they have...every time they get something. What would you say that attributes to?”

Participant. "Drugs. I know because that's what Saleem does"

Stage 2 Discovery. In the discovery stage, the individual develops a consciousness of conflicting perspectives usually precipitated by a confrontation or challenge. Facilitators asked who benefits and how they benefit from the status quo. One facilitator, said, "The people with money benefit. How? That's the question." Facilitators also questioned the myth of meritocracy and the societal expectations that stem from such myths. One facilitator noted, "...at the same time, I think we hold people to a standard to pull themselves up by the boot straps. But, then not realizing that's unattainable, people are scared that they don't meet this standard. Rarely do we see very clearly that society has played a part..." In response to discovery questions and comments, participants may have asked another question or compared the information to experiential knowledge. One participant asked, "I mean what group of people benefit from putting that idea in somebody's head?" Another participant demonstrated the conflict of perspectives when presented with a challenge about obtaining information.

Participant. “Yeah. There's some truth to that; but, on the same note, it's because of society but also when something happens in that person's life... For the most part it is what you

hear around you. I can't speak for everyone else, but I know for me and everything I tried to do in my lifetime, I had to call on someone else to give me input."

The participant seems to oscillate between systemic and individual responsibility for life's decisions while also noting the need for information to make informed decisions.

Level Two Pre-critical. The facilitator's questions or comments highlight contradicting beliefs and information that may bring into participants' awareness that their beliefs had a beginning, and thus, can have an end.

Stage 3 Duality. The individual attempts to find ways to hold countering beliefs while struggling to maintain pre-existing beliefs in the face of contradicting information or experience. For example, after having participants identify their thoughts about a topic and then read a scholarly article, the facilitator asks for their thoughts on the subject matter. One facilitator asked, "After reading this article, now what do you think about 'crack baby'?" The facilitator may also ask for participants to draw on their personal experience to counter strongly held beliefs. For example, when challenging the myth of meritocracy, the facilitator asked: "Is it possible to do everything that you're supposed to and still not get what you need?"

Participant. Yeah, because I'm in that situation now. I've faxed everything. Been up there to [Address]¹ 50 Ump-teen times. Anyone knows umpteenth? That's too damn many. So my question is who is over the state?"

The address mentioned, is where residents go for assistance with meeting their basic needs.

Participant noticed that he had followed instructions and still could not get his needs met, and thus, began to question the hierarchical chain of command.

¹ Address redacted.

Stage 4 Contemplation. Participants begin to trace the lineage of staunch beliefs to critically analyze their purpose, affect, and consequences. Participants contemplate belief permanency that uncovers their implantable nature. A facilitator may ask: When did you learn to think this way? When contemplating familial behavioral patterns, one participant noted, “That’s usually what happens it gets passed on from generation to generation.” A second participant stated, “At least not by my standards. It’s really not okay. You can see it that it is a generational thing that’s being passed down.” This quote exemplifies the understanding that beliefs are chosen and exist with the permission of the believer. Moreover, beliefs can differ from person to person. There is not one set of beliefs that everyone has or should have.

In addition to contemplating the roots of beliefs, the facilitator may ask participants to think beyond the individual level and will bring a historical perspective into the dialogue by referencing historical events. One facilitator moved the conversation to the macro level by stating, “Let’s talk about the culture of Black people; Black people that have been in the US for a while verses the black people that just arrived here.” A participant responded, “Slavery, although it ended, it’s still impacts African Americans until this day.” For the contemplation stage, it is important for the facilitator to not be distracted or sidetracked into a debate about whether or not slavery still impacts African Americans today, but to critically analyze what beliefs could stem from slavery and how these beliefs could impact African Americans today. Facilitator questions and comments allow participants to examine and evaluate beliefs and to consider whether or not beliefs are beneficial and then choose to keep or replace in face of confirming or contradicting evidence, a process that occurs within the Critical level.

Level Three Critical. For the critical level, facilitators’ questions and comments present participants with the option to integrate new and old ways of thinking that inform action.

Stage 5 Integration. Individuals integrate new and old ways of thinking that informs action.

Facilitator. “When people see a homeless person, they think it’s individual defects.”

Participant. “It’s society as well.”

This exchange demonstrates that the participant has integrated a more holistic way of thinking that leaves behind polarization, either-or, conclusions. A key feature for integration is being able to accept complexity and nuance.

Stage 6. Liberation. Based on the integration of new and old ideas, micro and macro factors, the individual can discern the roots of their thinking and the factors influencing consciousness and action. Facilitators may ask critical questions that have participants reflect on the connections between societal level phenomenon and micro-level behaviors. For example, a facilitator may ask, is there any way that substance use could be related to non-individual level factors?

Participant. Some of us think that we can’t do anything in life productive because of past history, so what we do, we turn to the risky behavior – as far as risky sex, shooting drugs, and abusive with our family members because we think we can’t become better people and it stems from what we were taught and what was experienced in the past. It got a lot to do with society.

This way of thinking is liberating because the person is free from 100% of the blame for problems they’ve experienced in their life. They are then free to reclaim their identity and redefine themselves on their own terms. When done effectively, critical dialogue connects micro, meso and macro processes and outcomes. Revised thinking challenges the distorted mirroring of society and presents a more accurate reflection. It also opens possibilities and more options for

action at non-individual levels. Critical questions, when used appropriately, allowed participants to uncover hidden truths and make the invisible visible, give voice to the unsaid, and highlight unwritten rules. Through critical dialogue, participants transform the way they think about themselves, others and community which, in turn, may change behavior and motivate civic engagement against oppressive realities.

Non-critical dialogue. Often times a facilitator will end up facilitating a non-critical dialogue. It's possibly impossible to eliminate all non-critical dialogue within a critical discussion. There are two key occurrences that indicate that critical analysis has left the dialogue in a non-critical state. When dialogue is not critical, participants may fall into patterns of debate, trying to convince others that they have the right answer (belief-baiting) and/or that there is a right answer (absolute truths). One facilitator noted, "There was some productive and healthy discussion about the "American Dream." Some members seemed to agree that the current definition of the "Dream" is unattainable while others disagreed and believe the dream is achievable by all." Albeit an interesting discussion, participants debating whether or not the dream is attainable is a different conversation then critically analyzing who benefits from having the idea of the "American Dream." This type of discussion easily leads to belief-baiting in that participants will dangle their beliefs like bait hoping other group members will bite. When facilitators did not ask critical questions, participants debated absolute truths. One participant noted when discussing the photo of the family, "That's the right environment to raise kids" indicating that situations different than those depicted (e.g., single parent or same sex households) are wrong environments to raise kids. Critical questions and statements posed by the facilitator and other participants generate critical dialogue that can move participants through the stages of transformative consciousness.

Critical Dialogue Practice Guidelines

From implementing critical dialogue in practice, *Community Wise* facilitators learned key facilitation techniques for critical consciousness development. First, critical dialogue is not about persuading others to take anyone's perspective. "Belief-baiting," wherein one uses their beliefs to get others to bite and come to their side, is not the purpose. Critical dialogue requires open-minded listening which is the act of listening with the willingness to change your own opinions about the topic being discussed (Cohen, 2014). The purpose of critical dialogue is to examine, question and evaluate new information that may contradict strongly held beliefs that maintain oppressive ideas, practices and behaviors.

The facilitator has a key role in assisting group members to examine, question and evaluate their own thinking, the thinking of others, and systems of inequity (i.e., oppression and privilege). Critical dialogue is not to educate participants in the hierarchical sense that the facilitator has the information to transfer to the participants. Traditional education systems in the US utilize the banking model wherein teachers are to deposit knowledge into the students who are considered empty vessels (Freire, 2000). On the contrary, critical dialogue is an educational experience wherein participants learn from each other in an egalitarian fashion and develop praxis: the perpetual cycle between critical reflection and action (Freire, 2000). To assist the process of critical consciousness development, a few critical dialogue facilitator techniques borrowed from evidence based models that can be useful during group sessions are summarized below.

Identifying distorted thoughts: Many automatic thoughts are signaled by terms such as, should, ought, and must. These distorted or unproductive thinking patterns are based on

participants' values. Unproductive thinking patterns are ways of thinking that cause inaction and limit problem solving (Beck, 1995). For example, these types of thinking patterns include:

- All or Nothing: Either we have to save the world or nothing we do matters.
- Overgeneralization: All Black people are lazy.

There are several ways to challenge distorted thoughts, such as, modeling, reframing, rolling with resistance, common Motivational Interviewing techniques (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

Modeling: Modeling is a powerful method used to teach a new skill (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Facilitators should demonstrate challenging automatic thoughts as well as critical thinking. The facilitator can also help participant explore supporting and contrasting evidence of the perspective as a way to challenge the distorted thinking pattern.

Reframing: A communication tool used to encourage participants to look at a situation or concept in a different way. Reframing acknowledges the validity of the participant's statement but provides new meaning, insight, or interpretation (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Facilitators can use reframing in order to help challenge participants' beliefs that may be oppressive, restrictive or unhelpful to participant's personal development.

There are traps that the facilitator may wish to avoid when working with the participants. These traps stymie the development and group process.

The Question/Answer Trap. Avoid the pattern of question/answer. Participant asks a question and the facilitator's answer only leads to more questions.

Example

Participant	Didn't the African chiefs sell their own people into slavery?
Facilitator	Some history books do say that but that may not be accurate.
Participant	So you think the history books are wrong?

Alternative responses to participant's initial question may include:

- What do you think?
- What if African chiefs did/didn't sell their own people?
- Where did you get your information? Where did the source of your information get their information?
- Who benefits from this knowledge?
- Is information in books always accurate?

Confrontation/Denial Trap. This trap may occur when the participant counters or challenges the facilitator with a denial level mindset. For example, the participant may state:

People wouldn't be incarcerated if they didn't do anything wrong. They need to take responsibility and stop blaming the system. However, instead of responding with another argument demonstrating the injustice of the criminal justice system from the facilitator's perspective, the facilitator can ask:

- Who does thinking that 'people need to take responsibility and stop blaming the "system" benefit?

- If everyone took personal responsibility and stopped blaming the “system,” would the criminal justice system be perfect or without problems?
- Do white people who are incarcerated blame the “system”?
- Who decides what is “wrong” and constitutes a crime?
- Who decides what sentence a crime should have?

The Expert Trap. Critical dialogue facilitators are not in the expert role. Facilitators facilitate the process of critical consciousness development. The learning that takes place occurs in collaboration with the facilitator and other participants. The expert trap occurs when facilitators direct or advise participants rather than facilitating the process and allowing the participant to determine his or her own goals, direction and perspective. The expert trap leads to a hierarchical relationship between facilitator and participant.

The Need to *Make It Right* Trap. People in the helping profession often want to “make it right” for others. Instead, facilitators should help participants help themselves by supporting self-efficacy and expressing empathy. Facilitators should not do the work for participants even if facilitator could do a better job. The journey is just as important as the destination.

Ways to Avoid Traps. As noted above, there are several traps facilitators should avoid. Most of these traps can be handled using clinical skills and Motivational Interviewing techniques, such as, Socratic questioning techniques, developing discrepancy, and rolling with resistance (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

Socratic Questioning/ Guided Discovery:

- How are my thoughts necessarily true?

- How are my thoughts consistent with the evidence?
- What are other ways of thinking about the situation?
- How did I learn to think this way?
- What types of experiments can I do to prove or disprove my beliefs?
- How do these thought/beliefs benefit/hurt me?

For example, if group members use euphemisms to soften or disguise racist beliefs, facilitators might reword the statement in a question that highlights the racism.

Participant	In my experience people in the black community just sit around watching TV and complaining.
Facilitator	Are you saying Black people are lazy complainers? Where did you learn this idea from? What is the evidence that (dis)confirms belief?

Developing Discrepancy: The facilitator may need to develop discrepancy between the participant's thoughts, statements, values or goals and the participant's behavior. To develop discrepancy, the facilitator can use reflective listening statements, open ended questions, and double-sided reflections.

Example

Participant	I know my son is addicted to pain killers. I'm worried about his health, but I continue to supply him with the drugs because I don't want to lose him.
Facilitator	You can't imagine how to stop supplying him with the prescription drugs and keep your relationship with him. You're scared of losing him if he overdoses or if you tell him "no."

Rolling with Resistance: Some participants may resist contradictory information that challenges their cherished belief systems in the discovery stage of transformative consciousness.

Participants may become defensive. In rolling with the resistance (Miller & Rollnick, 2002), facilitators can reiterate that the purpose of critical dialogue is not to argue or convince, but to present alternative perspectives for the participants' consideration and that each participant is free to accept or reject that perspective. In doing so, the participant would have utilized the newly acquired skills (e.g., critical thinking) and increases in empowerment to evaluate the foundation of their beliefs and the impact of those beliefs on self and environment.

Strategies for addressing contemplation (or what some practitioners may label "resistance") include the following:

- Statements demonstrating resistance are not challenged; rather than opposing the resistance, the facilitator should go (roll) with it, explore it, and normalize it.
- Identify specific concerns underlying the resistance and problem solve about these concerns.

- Shift focus away from the resistance causing topic and redirect attention to workable issues.
- Use agreement with a twist. The facilitator can agree with parts of the statement and then follow-up by reframing the issue.
- Emphasize personal choice and control to reassure the participant about self-determination.

Summarizing: A technique that can be used when the group discussion veers off- topic.

When the discussion has become unfocused, the facilitator should stop the conversation, summarize the main discussion themes, emphasize relevant topics, and bring the discussion back to topic.

The facilitation techniques seem to play an important role for the facilitation of critical dialogue. Particularly, they seem to facilitate comfort with discomfort which is valuable since discussions about inequity, power, marginalization, and systemic violence can be trigger discomfort (Jemal, Bussey, Young, 2019). This conceptual paper does not validate a theoretical framework or the intervention, but it does add to the literature by describing concepts and practices in detail so that practitioners can implement similar techniques in their practice and researchers can conduct further testing. However, more empirical evidence about critical dialogue effectiveness is needed. Also, practitioners should take caution about the potential for feelings of alienation to accompany critical consciousness development especially if self-efficacy is left out. Facilitators should be aware of the importance of self-efficacy and capacity building needed to bridge the gap between critical consciousness and critical action.

Conclusion

The paper suggests best practices for group work that incorporates facilitated critical dialogue to develop critical consciousness. By using the transformative consciousness framework, the qualitative exploration of the *Community Wise* sessions demonstrated one method of incorporating critical dialogue into social work practice. The qualitative exploration provided examples of the therapeutic tools used, particularly, to address internalized oppression, structural oppression, and health behaviors of *Community Wise* participants. The development of the *Community Wise* intervention includes contextual information about how critical questions and intentionally developed illustrations can be used to increase critical consciousness among participants engaged in critical dialogue. Following a similar format, social workers can use critical dialogue in the classroom with students, in private practice with clients and in institutions with co-workers, collaborators and other service providers.

Critical dialogue is necessary for the implementation of social justice practice, an ethical mandate (NASW, 2018). Clinical skills practiced from a social justice orientation allows individuals to critically assess the ways in which oppression and forms of inequity (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) have factored into the states and conditions of their lives. Oppression has been identified as a chronic stressor and fundamental cause of multi-domain systemic dysfunction (Jemal, 2018). Freire's problem-solving praxis to address oppression includes a cyclical relationship between critical consciousness (CC) and transformative action (Jemal & Bussey, 2019). Social workers, who have the professional and ethical duty to address oppression and promote social justice should develop critical consciousness in themselves, colleagues, and clients to address structural inequity and its associated consequences (Jemal, 2017b). Thus,

participation in and facilitation of critical dialogue exists at the intersection of practice and social justice, forming the cornerstone of social work group practice.

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