Meaningful Mentoring: Examining the Moderating Role of Mentoring on Pathways between Critical Consciousness and Vocational Identity

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BACKGROUND

Critical consciousness (CC) entails one's ability to critically analyze inequitable systems, along with the motivation and action taken to correct perceived systemic inequities (Freire, 1973; Watts et al., 2011). CC has been associated with many adaptive outcomes, including enhanced physical and mental health, school engagement, academic performance and degree attainment, civic engagement, and political participation (Heberle et al., 2020). CC has also been associated with vocational identity development and occupational attainment (Heberle et al., 2020; Rapa et al., 2018). Youth who experience marginalization—based on ethnic-racial identification, class, gender, or other marginalized social identities—have benefitted from CC development, leading some to consider it to be an "antidote to oppression" (Watts et al., 1999).

Along with CC, strong mentoring relationships have also been identified as a powerful resource for promoting positive development and thriving among youth, including youth experiencing marginalization (Bowers et al., 2012, 2015). The effects of CC on vocational identity may be bolstered through the presence of strong and supportive mentors, just as the relations between CC and other indicators of youth thriving are enhanced when mentoring relationships are strong (Bowers et al., 2020, Bowers et al., 2021).

Through our ongoing, exploratory work, we aim to: (1) examine the extent to which CC predicts vocational identity among youth (cf. Diemer & Blustein, 2006); and (2) explore how the presence of high-quality mentoring relationships may moderate the effects of CC on vocational identity.

MODELING CC AS A COMPOSITE VARIABLE

CC as measured via the CCS-S is typically modeled as a multidimensional construct (Rapa et al., 2020). For these exploratory, preliminary analyses, we initially modeled CC as an observed composite variable. We then examined the correlation between CC and vocational identity, which was also modeled as an observed composite variable.
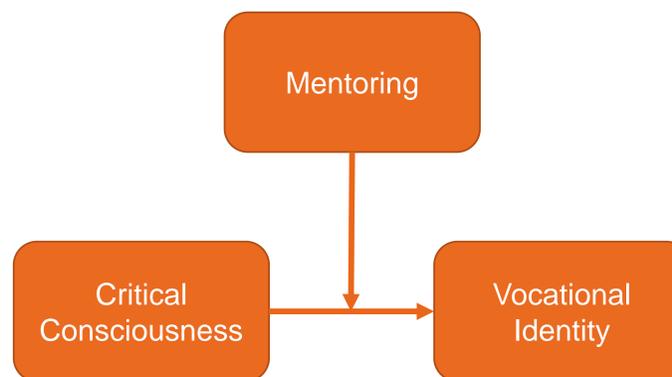
CC and vocational identity were correlated ($r = .21$, $p = .004$). We used hierarchical multiple regression to assess the predictive relation between CC and vocational identity. Block 1 included sociodemographic variables of *age*, *race*, and *gender* (see Bowers et al., 2020; Heberle et al., 2020). Block 2 included CC as a predictor variable alongside the sociodemographic variables that were specified in Block 1. **Results:** In accord with our hypotheses, CC was significantly associated with vocational identity.

Controlling for age, race, and gender, to what extent does CC predict vocational identity?

	Vocational Identity	
	Sociodemographic Model	Predictor Model
Block 1: Sociodemographic Variables		
Age	.01	.02
Race	.14*	.11
Gender	.13	.09
R^2 (adj.)	.02	
Block 2: Predictor Variable		
Critical Consciousness		.16*
R^2 (adj.)		.04
ΔR^2		.02

Note. *$p < .05$.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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        ┌───────────┐
        │ Mentoring │
        └─────┬─────┘
              │
              ▼
┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
│   Critical   │──▶│  Vocational  │
│Consciousness │   │   Identity   │
└──────────────┘   └──────────────┘
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SAMPLE

The sample was composed of 252 youth from the Southeastern United States. 54.2% self-identified as boys and 43.8% as girls ($M_{age} = 16.4$ years old). Youth were predominantly white (69%), Black (12%), multi-racial (8.8%), with the balance identifying with another ethnic-racial group.

MODELING CC AS MULTIDIMENSIONAL

To extend our initial analyses, we modeled CC in accord with its critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action dimensions (Rapa et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2011).

Critical Reflection: Egalitarianism and vocational identity were correlated ($r = .18$, $p = .014$), as were Critical Motivation and vocational identity ($r = .26$, $p < .001$) and Critical Action and Vocational Identity ($r = .17$, $p = .019$). We used hierarchical multiple regression to assess the predictive relation between CC's component parts and vocational identity. As with our previous analyses, Block 1 included sociodemographic variables of *age*, *race*, and *gender* and Block 2 included CC's dimensions as predictor variables alongside the sociodemographic variables that were specified in Block 1. **Results:** Critical Motivation was the only dimension of CC that was significantly associated with vocational identity.

Controlling for age, race, and gender, to what extent do CC's component parts predict vocational identity?

	Vocational Identity	
	Sociodemographic Model	Predictor Model
Block 1: Sociodemographic Variables		
Age	.01	.01
Race	.14	.11
Gender	.14	.11
R^2 (adj.)	.02	
Block 2: Predictor Variables		
CR: PI		-.09
CR:E		.01
CM		.23*
CA		.10
R^2 (adj.)		.08
ΔR^2		.06

Note. *$p < .05$. CR: PI = critical reflection: perceived inequality; CR: E = critical reflection: egalitarianism; CM = critical motivation; CA = critical action.

INSTRUMENTATION

Critical Consciousness
Critical Consciousness Scale-Short (Rapa, Bolding, & Jamil, 2020)
14 item scale
- CC composite (14 items; ; $\alpha = 0.80$)
- Critical Reflection: Perceived Inequality (3 items; $\alpha = 0.91$)
- Critical Reflection: Egalitarianism (3 items; $\alpha = 0.88$)
- Critical Motivation (4 items; $\alpha = 0.80$)
- Critical Action (4 items; $\alpha = 0.87$)

Vocational Identity
8 item scale, adapted from the *Vocational Identity Status Assessment* (Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, & Weigold, 2011)
- Vocational Identity composite (8 items; $\alpha = 0.89$)
- Career Commitment Making (5 items $\alpha = 0.86$)
- Identification with Career Commitment (3 items; $\alpha = 0.85$)

Mentoring Relationship
1 item, based on indication of not having or having a mentor
- "0" if respondent *does not* have a very important adult identified with whom they can discuss problems, "1" if respondent *does* have a very important adult identified

MODERATING EFFECTS OF MENTORING

Hayes' PROCESS model (Model 1) was used to examine the conditional effect of CC and Critical Motivation on vocational identity, accounting for mentoring as moderator. The results of the CC model were not significant (i.e., neither the effects of CC nor the interaction). The results of the Critical Motivation moderation model were significant (F[6, 178] = 3.7298, $p = .002$) and indicated the effect of Critical Motivation on vocational identity was moderated by mentoring. Specifically, the effect of critical motivation on vocational identity was attenuated when youth reported having a mentor.

Conditional Effects of Critical Motivation on Vocational Identity
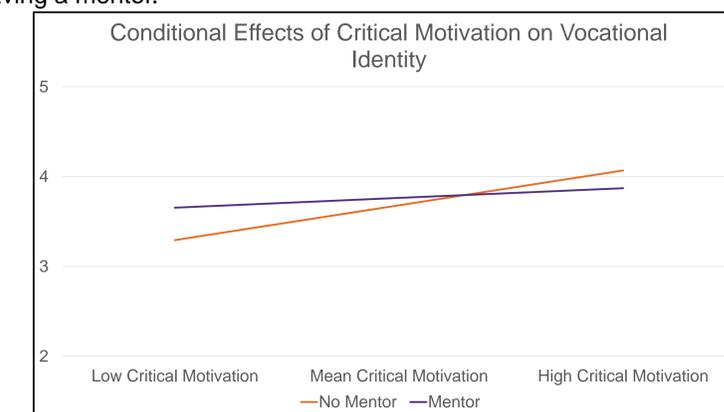
DISCUSSION

1. Exploratory analyses replicate previous research demonstrating linkages between CC and vocational identity.

2. Critical Motivation, in particular, appears to contribute meaningfully to the association between CC and vocational identity, suggesting it may be a meaningful mechanism supporting that association.

3. The conditional effect of critical motivation on vocational identity was diminished for those who reported having a mentor. That is, critical motivation may be less important to the development of vocational identity when mentorship is strong.