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Enhancing Critical Consciousness in Young African American Men: A Psychoeducational Approach

Roderick J. Watts
Georgia State University

Jaleel K. Abdul-Adil
University of Illinois at Chicago

Terrance Pratt
DePaul University

Critical thinking has long been a goal of schooling, but for young African American men critical thinking skills can also aid their sociopolitical development and the analysis of the everyday economic, social, and cultural challenges they face. Thus, critical thinking has the potential to be critical consciousness—a powerful strategy for understanding social forces and the dynamics of oppression. This article describes the Young Warriors program, which cultivates critical consciousness in young African American men through the use of the movies and rap videos about contemporary urban culture. The program shows how the thoughtful use of hip-hop can help young men to critically analyze their world and the messages in popular culture on gender, culture, race, and social class.

This article describes the Young Warriors intervention and its effort to cultivate critical consciousness and sociopolitical development in young African American men residing in low-income urban neighborhoods. It is multidisciplinary, drawing on several related topics: critical thinking, media literacy, political socialization, and psychosocial development. Over the years, we have conducted the Young Warriors program weekly and semiweekly in several midwestern schools and youth development settings. These schools have acute problems with violence, maintenance of an effective learning environment, disruptive gang activity, and low academic performance. All participants were young African American males, ranging in age from 11 to 21 years. Sometimes students were part of specially selected "manhood" groups that required participants to maintain a "B" average, whereas other students were from groups labeled as management problems by staff and were referred in an effort to make them more tractable. The curriculum varied depending on these factors, age, and type of organization.

The program draws from contemporary urban African American youth culture, namely hip-hop, principally in the form of films and rap videos. The latter are the source materials for students as they critically discuss race, gender, culture, class, history, and community action and development. Although not discussed here, Roderick J. Watts also worked with colleagues to develop and pilot a program for young women. The goal of Young Warriors is to foster and enhance critical thinking so that young men are more conscious of social forces that influence them and their communities—especially as they relate to race, culture, class, and gender. Our next step will be the development of community action projects that put their insights to work, a process we call "civic learning." It is similar to service learning, except that the focus is on changing social systems rather than on directly meeting the material or other needs of individuals.

To put Young Warriors in a theoretical and social research context, we begin with a brief integrative review of the ideas that inform our work: critical thinking and consciousness, and media literacy. All these concepts are related to the larger process of sociopolitical development, which we define as the evolving capacity to understand the social, economic, cultural, and political forces that shape one's status in society. It is a process of growth in knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and capacity for action needed to envision and work for liberation. Although the ideas guiding Young Warriors are im-

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Roderick J. Watts, Department of Psychology, Georgia State University; Jaleel K. Abdul-Adil, Department of Psychiatry, University of Illinois at Chicago; Terrance Pratt, Department of Psychology, DePaul University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Roderick J. Watts, Department of Psychology, Georgia State University, P.O. Box 5010, Atlanta, Georgia 30302. E-mail: psyrjw@panther.gsu.edu.

portant, the main purpose of this article is to demonstrate the practice of critical consciousness development, so we devote a good deal of our attention to the intervention itself.

Critical Thinking and Critical Consciousness

For at least 40 years, theorists and practitioners in U.S. education have recognized the growing importance of critical thinking skills and have called for the expansion and application of research in this area (National Education Association, 1961, as cited in Piro & Lorio, 1991). Theory has given rise to instrumentation, such as Facione and Facione's (1992) California Critical Thinking Skills Test. It includes subscales for many of the elements that we see as important to critical consciousness—the sociopolitical version of critical thinking: truth seeking, open-mindedness, analytical skills, and mature judgments. On the basis of work by Gramsci, Hopper (1999) offers a useful description of critical consciousness that shows its close relation to critical thinking:

> . . . learning to think critically about accepted ways of thinking and feeling, discerning the hidden interests in underlying assumptions and framing notions (whether these be class-, gender-, race/ethnicity- or sect-based). It means learning to see, in the mundane particulars of ordinary lives, how history works, how received ways of thinking and feeling serve to perpetuate existing structures of inequality. (p. 13)

Even in education there are some natural bridges between traditional ideas on critical thinking and the more culturally and politically aware notions of critical consciousness as developed by Freire (1990). Pierce, Lemke, and Smith (1988) note that " . . . working in both critical thinking and moral development simultaneously may have a mutual positive effect" (p. 125). For people with a history of oppression, such as young urban African American men, the ability to think independently and critically is a necessary prerequisite for the liberation process. After all, education is socialization, and it prepares people for social roles—be they high or low. Freire (1968, 1990) saw the sociopolitical as well as academic value of literacy building in his work with Brazilian peasants. He used the term *conscientization* to describe how people develop an awareness of the socioeconomic and cultural circumstances that shape their lives and their capacity to transform the world. For young African American men and psychologists, it could be said that critical thinking shifts to critical consciousness when person-centered concepts such as delinquency and violence are seen in historical, political, and cultural contexts. There is an awareness that violence can be structural and institutional as well as interpersonal (Bulhan, 1988a, 1988b). Policies rather than pistols are the deadly weapons, but they take no fewer lives (Johnson & Leighton, 1995). This view does not deny the power of personal agency in the decision to engage in prosocial, antisocial, or collective social action, but it does expand the analysis to the social forces that influence personal behavior. We argue that educators and human service professionals have an obligation to contribute at least in some modest way to the liberation of the oppressed people they serve.

Defining Oppression and Related Concepts

In greater detail elsewhere, we have defined oppression as both a *process* and an *outcome* (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). As a process, it is the unjust exercise of power by one group over another as a means of controlling ideas and desirable resources. This process serves to maintain an asymmetrical distribution of resources among socially meaningful groups (e.g., racial and gender groups). The outcome of oppression is the circumstances that result from a long-term and consistent denial of essential resources. Consistent with Brittan and Maynard's (1984) definition of primary oppression, the outcome of oppression is the circumstances that result from a long-term and consistent denial of essential resources.

For example, a school that resists changes in policies that expel and suspend young African American men from school at a disproportionate rate rather than addressing the root problems or that assigns a disproportionate number of those who remain to lower academic "tracks" condones oppressive institutional processes. At higher levels of socioeconomic analysis, oppressive institutional policies allow property taxes and other inequitable funding schemes to maintain racial inequities in public education (Fairchild, 1984). Are young people aware of such practices and their consequences? Over time, these processes contribute to outcomes: truancy, low academic performance, and other problems for youth. Later, service providers may describe these behaviors as clinical syndromes (e.g., conduct disorder) or as risk factors for negative psychosocial outcomes.

Focusing solely on an analysis of oppression is counterproductive. Although it provides knowledge of what is, it says nothing about what should be. If liberation is the goal in resisting oppression, it, too, is relevant to the educational process. What we present below is a heuristic theory of sociopolitical development that culminates in liberation. However, just as no oppression is absolute, no liberation is total—it is instead a process of becoming, as is the case for self-actualization, except that liberation encompasses the sociopolitical as well as the psychological. Watts, Williams, and Jagers (in press) define liberation as "challenging the gross social inequities between social groups and creating new relationships that dispel oppressive social myths, values, and practices." This liberation process contributes to the creation of a changed society and ways of being that support the economic, cultural, political, psychological, social, and spiritual needs of individuals and groups. In contrast to the personal and institutional violence that traumatizes individuals and groups, liberation supports the realization of human potential and authentic relations between people in a way that affirms life.

Popular Culture, Media Literacy, and a "Hook" for Critical Consciousness Development

The potential of TV, film, and other aspects of rapidly expanding mass media in socializing young men (for better or worse) has not been lost on social scientists or the public. The amount and intensity of sex, violence, and commercialism are the most frequent targets of attack. The U.S. Congress recently revisited this issue in the wake of shootings in largely White suburban school settings ("Congress Seeks Media Limits," 1999). Although it remains a matter of debate in some circles, the weight of empirical evidence indicates that media violence does contribute to aggressive behavior and other negative outcomes in young people. A review of the research literature by Donnerstein, Slaby, and Eron (1994) led them to state that despite some "departures from a pattern of findings . . . the research taken as a whole is rather conclusive . . . scholars in the field of mass media overwhelmingly support the assumption of a strong relation between televised violence and aggressive behavior" (p. 228). Because mass media reinforces traditional and often socially destructive features of masculinity, it is an especially appropriate target for an intervention with young men.

Some argue that TV, music, and film pose a special threat to Black youngsters. According to Stroman (1986, 1991), African American children tend to watch more TV than other children, and Black adolescents may be more vulnerable to TV messages because the medium often serves as a source of personal guidance for topics ranging from dating to occupations (Stroman, 1991). The role of the media in sustaining oppression is usually framed in the literature as social stereotyping, although the ability of TV to damage self-esteem remains a topic for debate. In the concluding chapter of the book *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, Dates and Barlow (1993) contends that "the Black images mass-produced by [White owners and producers] have been filtered through the racial misconceptions and fantasies of the dominant white culture, which has tended to deny the existence of a rich and resilient black culture of equal worth" (p. 523). On the other hand, Heintz-Knowles (1995), examining depictions of children on scripted series television, concluded that there was no evidence that children of African descent were being portrayed more negatively than children of other ethnic groups. However, she concluded, as other researchers have, that invisibility in leading roles is as much a problem as the depictions of people of color who do appear. Moreover, the research did not include some of the programs most watched by youngsters—music videos and films.

There is also the question of who is most influenced by negative, distorted, and stereotypical media portrayals. Children of low-income parents are less able to afford or create entertainment alternatives to TV. If the parents are working two jobs to make ends meet, then there could also be less parental supervision of TV viewing. Class is not the only factor that places African American children at risk, however. Even when education level is controlled, Black children watch much more TV than their White counterparts (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998). Arguably, all of these factors conspire to make Black youngsters especially vulnerable to influences from TV and film.

We view the relationship between media exposure and behavior as complex. The relationship among media viewing, the viewer, and behavior is summarized in Figure 1. We assume that violent, antisocial, irresponsible, and sexist behavior seen by young men on TV and film influences the attitudes and behavior of youngsters who are vulnerable because of certain personal and ecological factors (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998). Fortunately, significant others who watch or discuss TV with them may help moderate the negative effects (Stroman, 1991), as we predict critical consciousness training does.

Young Warriors: Fighting Fire With Fire

The widespread popularity of music videos further complicates media socialization questions. Music videos, especially rap videos, are currently very popular among young African American men and youth in general. They frequently depict hard-hitting

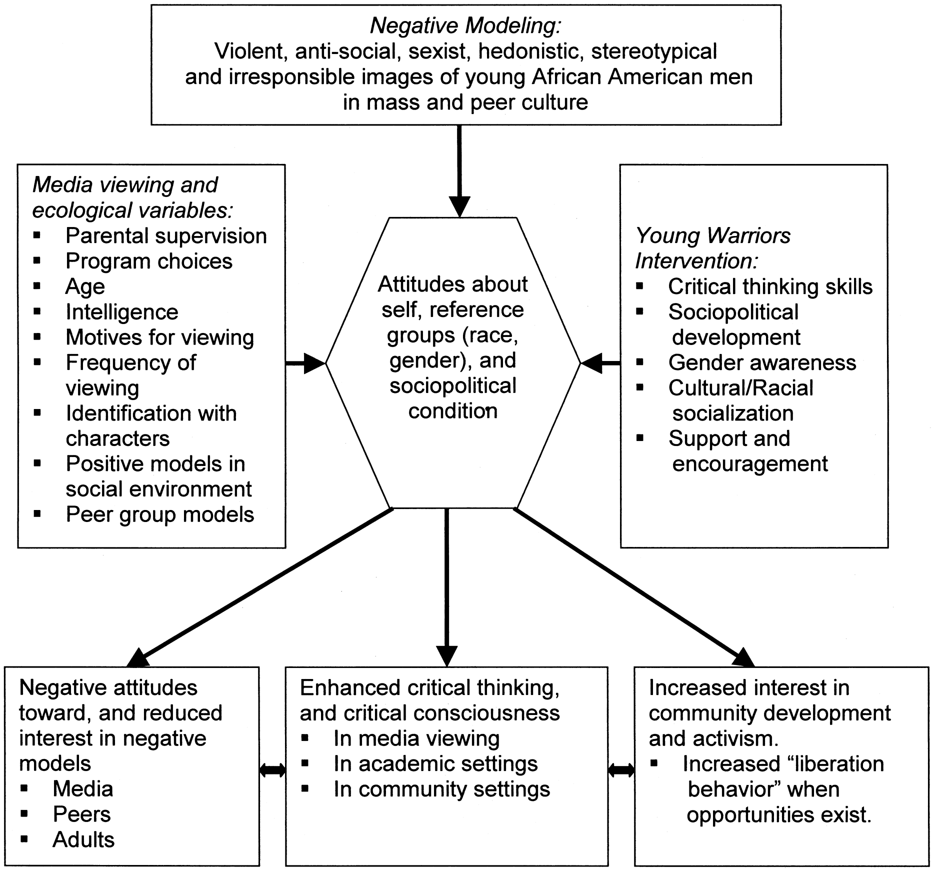
Negative Modeling:
Violent, anti-social, sexist, hedonistic, stereotypical and irresponsible images of young African American men in mass and peer culture
Media viewing and ecological variables:
▪ Parental supervision
▪ Program choices
▪ Age
▪ Intelligence
▪ Motives for viewing
▪ Frequency of viewing
▪ Identification with characters
▪ Positive models in social environment
▪ Peer group models
Attitudes about self, reference groups (race, gender), and sociopolitical condition
Young Warriors Intervention:
▪ Critical thinking skills
▪ Sociopolitical development
▪ Gender awareness
▪ Cultural/Racial socialization
▪ Support and encouragement
Negative attitudes toward, and reduced interest in negative models
▪ Media
▪ Peers
▪ Adults
Enhanced critical thinking, and critical consciousness
▪ In media viewing
▪ In academic settings
▪ In community settings
Increased interest in community development and activism.
▪ Increased "liberation behavior" when opportunities exist.

Figure 1. Predicted relationships among media viewing, sociopolitical development, and other outcomes.

violent, sexual, nihilistic, and misogynistic themes (Hansen, 1995). Their popularity and potential harm make them ideal source material for critical consciousness training. They are especially useful in working with men, because they reflect such a consciously hypermasculine worldview (often emphasizing the most problematic elements of traditional masculinity). Participants in our Young Warriors program deconstruct and discuss rap videos and movies and use them as the point of departure for a wide range of topics on community change and development. Students in the program "read" and analyze the videos as they would a book. This skill is the audiovisual equivalent of print literacy. The aim is to produce sophisticated, astute, and critical consumers of TV, films, videos, video games, the Internet, and the like. Media literacy training goes beyond academic learning, however; it plays a role in sociopolitical development. As Masterman (1993) notes, mass media contains ideological messages with social and political implications. A critical consciousness of mass media can help young men deconstruct experiences that are related to race, culture, and gender and that are part of their daily experiences.

The "warrior" image is used because it is one that young men readily identify with in sports figures, violent movie characters, local gangs, and the like. Although women have been warriors throughout history and around the world, the warrior lifestyle is often associated with masculinity. Moore and Gillette (1990) describe the attributes and the endurance of the warrior archetype through the analysis of myth and history in a wide range of cultures. "True" warrior values include a struggle for a higher purpose, an ability to formulate goals, the exercise of discipline, and a cooperative spirit. Note that "struggle" is a broader notion than physical conflict. We repeatedly emphasize this point in the program. We see this creed as a sociopolitically and culturally conscious reform of traditional masculinity.

> Warriors struggle and fight, but only for a higher purpose or goal—for example, survival, freedom, justice, knowledge, security, prosperity, spiritual growth, and self-determination.
>
> Warriors have great discipline and focus. They don't waste their energy or resources on things that don't help them reach their goal.
>
> Warriors cooperate with and strengthen others. They realize that the strength of others in their community is essential to effective struggle, because they can't win alone. Effective struggle requires unity.

Several of the notions listed above, such as self-determination, spiritual growth, and unity, are expressly linked to an African cultural world view. These three notions correspond to three of the Nguzo Saba, or Seven Principles of Blackness (Karenga, 1989), that are best known as part of Kwanzaa. Respectively, they are Kujichagulia, Umoja, and Imani.

We wish to make clear that the Young Warriors program does not seek to glorify sexist or brutal expressions of the warrior tradition, nor does it attempt to counter them with condescending and often hypocritical monologues on the evils of violent, antisocial behavior. Indeed, the United States was created by systematic violence against Native and African Americans, and slavery ended in connection with a bloody war. Violence and intimidation continue to be strategies used the world over. Program staff also show restraint with their own values, because the purpose is not to indoctrinate students into the trainer's personal politics. Indoctrination is antithetical to critical consciousness. People cannot be told what to think and urged to think for themselves at the same time! Trainers are instructed to emphasize the quality of the process by which students draw their conclusions rather than to make personal judgments about the conclusions themselves. Adults who force-feed ideas rather than share their ideas in dialogue quickly alienate young people and shut down discussion. Moreover, heavy-handed moralizing by staff may conflict with the participants' personal, family, or cultural values. Instead, the objective is to more subtly encourage peer-to-peer learning. In our experience collectively, young people show wisdom and good judgment when given exposure to a range of ideas in a discussion. We provide them with materials on a range of male and female African American heroes (past, present, local, national, and international) who exemplify discipline, scholarship, commitment to a cause, and the willingness to struggle against personal challenges, social injustice, and adversity. Despite efforts not to impose our own values, our values are very much a part of the program. They include questioning authority. To some, critical thinking that allows people to question political or religious authority or family or cultural values may be seen as wrong. Morals as well as professional ethics require that parents and communities have a voice in making an informed decision about who is in a position to influence their child. In Young Warriors, parents make informed choices about their child's participation on the basis of our informed-consent procedures. In one case, a parent with strong religious convictions decided not to allow his son to participate in Young Warriors.

"Fighting fire with fire" means using elements of the problem to create a solution. The "in-your-face" masculinity of rap music and videos, combined with the notion of the warrior, is certainly an example of this strategy. Rap is a powerful "hook" for engaging young men and presents an opportunity to rethink both warrior and masculinity images. Although rap music is a fairly recent phenomenon, it dates back many hundreds of years to the oral rendering of history by west African griots. In the 1960s, groups such as The Last Poets combined politically conscious poetry with drumming or up-tempo music arrangements. In the late 1970s, hip-hop music came along and thrived in the urban party scene. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, it returned to its political origins, and a number of culturally and politically aware radical rappers offered useful illustrations of critical consciousness through their incisive social commentary (Abdul-Adil, 1992). Although our focus is on young men of African descent, it is no secret that the art form is very popular with European American youngsters and with other young people the world over.

Examples of classic radical rap artists include Public Enemy, KRS-One, Brand Nubian, De La Soul, Gang Starr, and Tupac Shakur. Although its golden age (approximately 1986 to 1992) appears to have ended, radical rap remains a subgenre of hip-hop music and a useful source of instructional material. At this writing, the circle of socially conscious artists includes Common, Outkast, Goodie Mob, Dead Prez, the Coup, Lauryn Hill, and Black Starr. In the rap "The Experience," Goodie Mob (1998, track 1) provides a social commentary on the glorification of gangsta life in the mass media and in rap:

> That's why the property value ain't no good in a n-ga[1] neighborhood

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[1] We abbreviated gender and racial terminology we found offensive, but we support the right of artists to express themselves in their own work as they see fit.

A n-ga could overstand if he only understood
I'm sick of lying, I'm sick of glorifying dying
I'm sick of not trying, I'm sick of being a n-ga
So many Black men out here trying to be n-ga's
Keepin' it real to the point that they dying to be n-ga's
When in actuality the fact is, you ain't a n-ga cause you
Black
You a n-ga 'cause of how you act

So-called gangsta rappers play a role that complements that of radical rappers; they give young people a vivid sense of the antisocial lifestyles and world view associated with oppression as outcome, while they portray the values, rewards, and hazards of the street lifestyle in the language of young men on the street. Gangsta rap is a rich source of material for critique. This gangsta subgenre includes the artists Scarface, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Master P, and Juvenile. In addition, radical and gangsta rap themes are powerfully portrayed in hip-hop movies, which depict rap-oriented messages in cinema images such as *Boyz n the Hood, Menace to Society, Tales from the Hood, Juice, N 2 Deep, I Got the Hook Up,* and *Belly*. Unlike rap videos, which become dated and stale within months in the eyes of young people, film images, for some reason, have an extended life. They continue to engage youth for years after release. Snoop Doggy Dogg has sold many millions of records featuring hard-core lyrics on urban realities as he sees them. In "See You When I Get There," Snoop (Snoop Dogg, 1998, track 16) presents a poignant message to peers engaged in drug dealing, gang banging, or other high-risk behaviors, telling his audience, without preaching, that the lifestyle leads to death and destruction. His commentary anticipates the questioning of adaptation that leads to the precritical stage:

Mamma I wanna know where my daddy at
My only memory is a picture with a chrome gat
I wanna do, like them gangsters do
I wanna gangster walk
I caught a bullet now I'm in some chalk
Just another young n-ga in a song
Mama always told me gangsters don't live long
After I'm dead can you still see me
Do you really want to be me?

We use this gritty slice-of-life realism as a point of departure for a discussion of the adaptation to oppression, that is, the idea that oppressive social relations are fixed, and rather than making futile attempts to change them, it is better to find a way to "get paid" without concern about what is best for your community and its residents. This rugged and ruthless individualism is certainly a feature of U.S. culture, but it can also be very antisocial. Whether it is the ruthless pursuit of profit by gangs or by corporations, the effect on communities can be devastating. So, we ask: Why are people living this way? What are the short-term benefits? What are the long-term consequences? What are the connections among street life, masculinity, and "warriorship"? Although the language, misogyny, or subject matter can be highly objectionable to many, young people are nonetheless exposed to a great deal of this material, and they often see it differently. If they do not develop the capacity to critically examine it and if they lack an opportunity to discuss the alternative views of some of their peers, they risk incorporating it into their own worldview. Fortunately, conscious rappers, such as Common, help by holding their gangsta colleagues accountable for antisocial messages. A rapper's critique has much more influence early in the training than that of program staff. In the rap "Geto Heaven, Part 2," Common (2000, track 14) uses critical consciousness to critique gangsta rap's highly glamorized "thug" persona. In doing so, he illustrates our primary educational goal for the adaptation stage—helping young men assess the morality and long-term viability of coping with injustice through criminality:

The blunted eyes of the youth search for a guide
A thug is a lost man in disguise
The rise and fall of a nation, even when the buildings
tumble
I still stand tall
I walk through the valley with a life preserver
Feeling at times I might just murder
Yo, but that ain't what I was sent for
I want folks to say his life meant more

When young men begin to take an interest in the sociopolitical dimension of their lives, acceptance and resignation give way to a growing awareness of and concerns about how inequality is established and maintained. Critical consciousness is just emerging, but the desire to learn more increases. Martin Luther King Jr. (1958) described this process in his civil rights movement: "Once plagued with a tragic sense of inferiority, resulting from the crippling effects of slavery and segregation, the Negro has now been driven to reevaluate himself" (p. 190). Books by Black men, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (X, 1964/1992) and *Monster* (Shakur, 1993), are often useful because they capture the imaginations of young urban men and because they are unabashedly masculine in a style that is familiar to them (although the patriarchal and sexist aspects of this style must also be subject to critical analysis). They chronicle a journey from playing a game your enemy has created to challenging it. These books engage young men who admire street-savvy, macho characters who brim with charisma and personal power. However, they give them a vision beyond playing a game that contributes to their own oppression. The books never apologize for masculine warrior energy; instead, they illustrate the many manifestations and glorious potentials of warriorship once harnessed for progressive action. In his best-selling autobiography *Monster*, Sanyika Shakur (1993) describes the emergence of critical consciousness:

> The most important connection I made was with Muhammad, with the New African Independence Movement . . . it redeemed me. It gave me answers to all the questions I had about myself in relation to this society. I learned about how our situation in this country was that of an oppressed nation, colonized by capitalist-imperialists . . . I began to see Cripping [i.e., involvement in the Crips street gang] in a different light. There was a faction . . . claiming to be revolutionary Crips, but this was contradictory and could not be attained without transforming the criminal ideology of Crip and its relation to the masses of the people. (pp. 351–352)

Details on Enhancing Critical Consciousness

We have learned through experience that preaching our values results in either immediate or delayed negative effects, because it is an imposition rather than a learning process. In contrast, skillful use of films and videos in conjunction with coaching and questioning can trigger a transition to a more critical consciousness. Students can figure out what we think is good and feed it back to us to gain approval. So, we ask deceptively simple questions: Why does this community have so many potholed streets and so many shootings when others do not? Why do you have to be in a classroom with 30 other children, and schools elsewhere have smaller classes and more equipment? Why does it take so long for junk cars to be moved in this area, but they are gone in a couple of hours downtown? What do you think about the attitude he [someone in a video] has toward women? The primary education strategy for the precritical stage of sociopolitical development is to ask many questions and provoke discussion about the circumstances in the world. Then we work with the young men to find the information needed to answer their questions. Ultimately, we want to offer civic learning projects in the community that allow students to test and apply their emerging skills in the real world.

The critical consciousness coaching technique has five components that are used in conjunction with a video stimulus. We begin by playing a rap video or film clip. Then, we go around a circle of 7 to 12 young men and encourage them to engage the group and us by asking the following questions, the last of which relates to constructive action:

1. What did you see (hear)? Say what you saw and heard first.
2. What does it mean? What is the person trying to say? What is he or she trying to do?
3. Why do you think that? Why do you think that is what it means? Support what you think with evidence.
4. How do you think and feel about what you saw or heard? How does it fit with the Warrior Creed? How does it fit with your values or past actions? Is what you saw and heard good, bad, or neither?
5. What would you do to make it better? What steps can you and others take to improve the situation?

With practice, students begin to better articulate their views and show more evidence of critical thinking (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998). Using the biting social commentary of radical rappers such as Mos Def (1999, track 16), we help them along by providing examples of critical consciousness:

> The White unemployment rate is nearly more than triple for Blacks
> So front liners got they gun in yo backs
> Bubbling crack, jewel theft and robbery to combat poverty
> And end up in a global jail economy
> Stiffer stipulations attached to each sentence
> Budget cutbacks but increased police presence
> And even if you get out of prison still living
> Join the other five-million under state supervision
> This is business, no faces just lines and statistics
> From your phone, your zip code, the S in side digits
> The system break man, child, and women into figures
> Two columns for who is and who ain't n-gas

In the group discussions that we facilitated for the young men, most of their responses fell into category 1 or 2 above (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998), probably because describing and offering an opinion on a stimulus are the easiest of the five responses to make. However, early on, it was a challenge to coax the young men to produce even these. Creating an environment safe for intellectual exploration and risk was a real challenge. It was only over time that brief declarative sentences in categories 1 and 2 evolved into more complex and sophisticated responses that were well defended and constructive as well as critical.

Although only in its initial stages, our early empirical work suggests that interventions of this kind can be beneficial to young men. During the eight-session group program for approximately 10 young men, there was evidence over time of an increase in the frequency of critical thinking responses as a proportion of all categories of verbal responses. The proportion increased steadily and peaked in the closing sessions. In addition to any increase in critical consciousness skills attributable to the training, we suspect that part of what occurred was an increased willingness to take intellectual risks and strengthen critical thinking skills.

The participants showed enthusiasm and responsiveness to the warrior concept, particularly in connection with the film and video depictions of masculinity. Faculty and staff who regularly observed the sessions remarked about the higher levels of attention, participation, and decorum in our sessions than in the ordinary classroom and a decrease in the disruptive and antisocial behavior outside the program. They also described a radiating effect of program concepts: they saw ideas from the program spreading to nonparticipants by word of mouth. Teachers attributed these changes to the program, but novelty and attention factors certainly play a role as well. Nonetheless, these encouraging anecdotes provide some ideas to investigate more rigorously in a well-controlled evaluation of Young Warriors.

Challenges of Hip-Hop and of Work in School Settings

Although anecdotal data from teachers and the other pilot data are encouraging, we are realistic about the impact of such a short-term intervention. In one school, we were given the most “difficult” students—those with a reputation for emotional problems, serious or chronic misbehavior, and “learning problems.” At least one committed a serious property crime while enrolled in the program. We are under no illusions that a modest program such as Young Warriors will magically change what has taken oppression generations to produce. Like learning to read, sociopolitical development must be an ongoing process that is reinforced throughout the community, not a one-shot intervention.

Conducting programs in urban and impoverished environments rife with oppression and the constant barrage of life-threatening stressors, such as drive-by shootings, gang warfare, armed robberies, domestic violence, and family disintegration, is a continuing challenge. We see young men adapting by creating the character armor they need to protect themselves. They exude “cool” and “hard” exteriors that are a challenge to penetrate. When is the last time you saw a rapper smiling on the cover of his CD? Being a Black male has become synonymous with being “hard.” However, if you have patience, what you find underneath reminds you that these young men are still youngsters.

The crisis mode that schools are often forced to adopt to cope with ecological realities can create a chaotic intervention environment. Consequently, static quasi-experimental designs that cannot respond to fluid and changing circumstances are impractical. This is one reason that the initial research on Young Warriors was qualitative and based on text data session transcriptions. Urban schools are a continuing reminder of the need for action-research methods that are flexible, process oriented, and collaborative. The circumstances of a situation serve as a reminder that researchers need to be action scholars concerned with positive change as well as new knowledge.

Beware that much of the most popular rap music does not contribute directly to critical consciousness. Some rappers, particularly younger artists, focus on a first-person description of today’s impoverished urban world (i.e., oppression as outcome). These slice-of-life soliloquies are often given without political commentary, and they may glamorize gangsterism and a misogynistic, predatory, drug-oriented world view. Consequently, rap is a double-edged sword. It can cut in the direction of uplift and increased political sophistication, or it can cut in the direction of rationalizing or even promoting an antisocial lifestyle. Because young people will watch rap videos with or without adult involvement, the wise trainer uses it, but deftly. Those who are tempted to incorporate rap in their work should use extreme caution, especially those who are personally unfamiliar with it, hip-hop culture, and the urban ecology that spawned them. Finally, it is essential that those who help others enhance their critical consciousness have some of their own. Although we know of no research on this question, personal experience indicates that those with an interest in critical consciousness interventions benefit from first working with others who have greater experience in this work. As hooks (1994) has noted, to be critically conscious one must locate oneself in the social order. Locating one’s privilege, oppression, and worldview as a function of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and other socially meaningful attributes is a good place to start. Space does not permit a full explication of this matter, but most of the authors cited in this article provide examples of critical consciousness in research and sociopolitical analysis.

From Critical Consciousness to Activism

Relatively few people will make a long-term commitment to social justice, but society benefits when everyone makes a small contribution. Some rappers, as they mature, take symbolic and sometimes substantive action in the interest of a better world. Fifteen years ago, several prominent rappers produced two community service rap videos, titled “Stop the Violence” and “We’re All in the Same Gang.” Both were recorded live, one in Los Angeles and the other in New York City. Also, rappers KRS-One and Chuck D (D and Jah, 1997) began to speak out and take action on social issues. All these events suggest that critical consciousness and maturity grow into action as young people seek out vehicles for activism. Channeling energy into constructive channels well matched to personal talents is the big challenge. The Warrior Creed is intended to highlight some activist basics—the inevitability of struggle in its many forms, discipline in the service of goals, and cooperation with others. The emphasis on cooperation and solidarity is preparation for group civic learning projects. We attempt to foster group responsibility and consciousness because as a group, young African American males die younger, attain less formal education, are more frequently incarcerated, and are at greater risk for adverse health outcomes than other populations.

Community activism and civic participation are our next steps—in other words, contributing in some modest way to the liberation of young African American men. We hope to collaborate with schools to provide a range of civic learning projects including improving city services, cultural and community development and service projects, and activism aimed at creating or reforming institutions and policy change. Thus, activism comes in at least two flavors: (a) interventions in the prevailing social system that range from reform to radical restructuring and (b) the development of independent, culturally conscious institutions that reflect the unique resources and needs of the oppressed group. These themes parallel those that have been of value to African Americans since their arrival in the Americas.

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