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# Factors of Activism; Identification and Promotion to Increase Global Equity

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# Factors of Activism; Identification and Promotion to Increase Global Equity

Sam Larsen  
IAS - Psychology  
May, 2018

Faculty Adviser: Rachel M. Hershberg, Ph.D.

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,  
University of Washington, Tacoma

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Approved:

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to use a critical consciousness framework to analyze two possible factors that may contribute to individual levels of civic engagement, how these factors can operate within a global framework, and how these factors may be promoted through educational institutions to increase equity in societies around the globe. The data analyzed for this study comes from data collected as part of a study of beliefs and actions regarding social justice issues on the University of Washington Tacoma campus. For this paper, the two factors being studied as mediators in the relationship between awareness of social inequity (critical reflection) and the actions taken to address those inequalities (critical action) are empathy and social justice identity. Empathy is an innate human trait that can be enhanced through purposeful instruction and may be responsible for motivating individuals to engage in causes that do not directly impact them. By contrast, social justice identity is conceptualized as a stable construct, similar to a worldview belief or personality factor, and therefore is less likely to be influenced by an education-based intervention but may still be important to the promotion of activism behaviors. The results of statistical mediation analyses indicate that empathy and social justice identity both are partial mediators in the relationship between critical reflection and critical action. However, social justice identity demonstrated a larger mediating effect. Lastly, implications of findings and potential intervention programs aimed at promoting civically engaged citizens in societies worldwide using educational institutions are discussed.

*Keywords:* Empathy, Social Justice Identity, Global Equity, Education, Critical Consciousness

### **Factors of Activism; Identification and Promotion to Increase Global Equity**

Most societies around the globe have some form of an education system. These institutions are responsible for the formal education and informal socializing of the next generation of those societies' citizens. However, this system has been simultaneously criticized for its role as a tool of social control, ensuring maintenance of existing hegemonic structures, and praised as a vehicle through which liberation and social equity can be achieved. (Jemal, 2017). As a liberation tool, schools offer the chance to orient individuals, regardless of their level of privilege in a society, on a pathway to engage in activism behaviors that promote equity. Throughout this paper, two types of equity are mentioned. The first is social/societal equity, and the second is global equity. Equity, overall, is related to concepts such as justice and fairness. That there should be a baseline level of support, comfort, and access to resources for everyone regardless of the identity and beliefs of an individual. Social/societal equity concerns the access to resources and opportunity of specific groups on a societal level and therefore is more likely to be influenced by individual activism and any responding governmental/national policy changes. However, though activism aimed at addressing social inequities may be reflexive of a specific social condition in a given society (e.g., women being unable to vote), it is often indicative of greater global inequities (e.g., the opportunities of women to participate in government around the world). Global equity, therefore, is concerned with the same issues of fairness and justice as social equity but at a more extensive, global scale. Furthermore, it is through many actions taken at addressing inequalities at the societal level that result in an overall increase in global equity. In the measure used for this study, domains of inequality focused around issues of sexism, racism, ableism, classism, ruralism, and LGBTQIA discrimination. Using these domains of inequality to inform a perspective of a global framework, we can see that some societies are better in some

domains of equity than others, but the status of equity in each society can combine to create a global barometer for equity regarding a specific domain (e.g., sexism).

Returning to education, through the adoption and internalization of social justice beliefs influenced or expressed directly by instruction, such as the idea that increased global equity is a benefit for an increasingly globalized world, it is possible that a new generation of activists are born from the education system, especially those exposed to education at the college or university level. Some institutions, such as the University of Washington Tacoma, have integrated a social justice orientation into their strategic priorities in an effort to “promote and model equity, inclusion and social justice.” (UW Tacoma's Strategic Plan, 2018). Central to the fulfillment of the goals of this strategic priority is the idea that education on issues related to social justice will lead to the promotion of social equity by the student body. However, education and awareness of societal inequities are often not enough to create civically engaged and active citizens that combat the status quo. In fact, education of inequity without the ability or knowledge of how to engage in political activities can paralyze individuals, especially those more marginalized, and lead to hopelessness and apathy (Thomas et al., 2014). However, even with this understanding, some argue that it is not the role of educational institutions to create civically engaged citizens. Instead, the role of education is to increase the ability of students to think and reflect on information critically, and if activism behaviors follow as a result of increased reflection, it is an notable but unintended outcome. My argument, however, is that education does lead to liberation, but as discussed previously, purposeful intervention occurring in the educational system has the highest chance of increasing individual levels of civic engagement and activism and should be integrated into teaching practices, especially at colleges and universities that value social equity as a strategic impact goal for their communities.

Therefore, the question must then be asked, if we wish to create an intervention that can be used by instructors within the education system, which is a system present in nearly all societies across the globe, what factors should we focus on to push individuals from only being aware of societal inequities to using civic engagement activities to take action in order to create a more equitable society. The identification and impact of these factors are what this research attempts to identify and explores possible ways these factors can be integrated within an education system with the goal of increasing global equity.

## **Literature Review**

### **Critical Consciousness Framework**

My analysis relies on a critical consciousness framework, which is based on the work of Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire (1970). Within this framework, critical consciousness is defined as a tool through which individuals may free themselves from systemic inequity maintained and promoted by various institutions and systems. Critical consciousness is achieved and assessed through two sub-components. The first is an individual's level of awareness and analysis of social inequalities and injustices, labeled as critical reflection (CR), and then the actions taken, typically assessed through participation in civic activities (e.g., voting, protesting, petitions, etc.), to change those perceived inequalities, labeled as critical action (CA) (Diemer & Rapa, 2016). An example of this is an individual who is aware of a lack of access to resources for the homeless (i.e., critical reflection), and then votes on measures that increase the number of emergency shelters for the homeless (i.e., critical action). Furthermore, these two factors of critical reflection and critical cooperate in a recursive process, with reflection leading to action, then subsequently back to reflection before going to action again. Additionally, while critical reflection and critical action are shown to be associated in past

research done with youth, the process through which critically reflective individuals become critically active is unknown (Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Jemal, 2017). For this study, it is hypothesized that two potential factors act as mediators in the relationship between critical reflection and critical action. The two proposed mediating factors are empathy and social justice identity. These factors were chosen because they are not only plausible mediating variables given past research on the motivations for civic engagement, but they also represent different types of factors, trait-based and personality/identity-based.

### **Motivations for Civic Engagement**

There have been several factors and motivations identified and proposed to explain the link between awareness of inequalities and the engagement in action to combat them. These factors include; personal experience of discrimination, the belief that civic engagement is important, a desire to self-promote oneself based on activism behaviors (Ballard, 2014; Borshuk, 2014), interpersonal relationships to individuals who experience marginalization, a self-identified predisposition for activism behaviors (Borshuck, 2014). As well as an empathetic connection with affected individuals beyond one's immediate social spheres (Borshuck, 2014; Travis & Leech, 2013). As indicated by past research, there are many different reasons why individuals utilize their civic engagement opportunities, ranging from the underlying desire to be noticed for their civic engagement, to the identification of moral beliefs that civic engagement is important as a member of society. Additionally, we see that that interpersonal connection to the conditions of individuals who experience marginalization and the empathetic capacity of responding individuals play a motivating role to some individuals currently engaging in civic activities.

## **Empathy**

In our study, we operationalized empathy as the skill and ability to empathize with the marginalization experiences of others. Past literature has found that empathy is an innate human trait (Gerdes & Segal, 2011) and is an essential part of interpersonal relations, allowing individuals to be attentive to the mental state and emotions of other people (Carré, Ambrosio, Bensalah, Stefanaiak, & Besche-Richard, 2013). However, even within this single definition, different sub-components of empathy are conceptualized to exist and interact together. These sub-types include cognitive empathy, emotional contagion, emotional disconnection (Carré et al., 2013), and emotional empathy (made up of two components: reactive and parallel empathy) (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). As a more general conceptualization, empathy involves two components: sensitivity to others emotional affect (emotional empathy), and cognitive perspective taking. Emotional empathy is often conceptualized to be similar to sympathy, wherein you feel similar emotions or react to the emotions of another individual through interpersonal interactions. By contrast, cognitive empathy involves the action of cognitive perspective or role taking of the other individual's situation (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). As stated previously, empathy is an innate human trait and can be conceptualized to be similarly influenceable to improvement like other innate human traits such as hand-eye coordination. As such, purposeful instruction such as directed readings and active encouragement in the perspective-taking action descriptive of cognitive empathy can influence the development of empathetic capacity similar to how sports programs improve hand-eye coordination (Gerdes & Segal, 2011; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Cognitive empathy may reduce prejudice and increase the likelihood of outgroup civic activism because the perspective-taking action allows individuals the opportunity to increase their awareness of the internal and external lives of others. This

allows them to find perhaps that they share more commonalities than differences (Stephan & Finlay, 1999) and this may be the mechanism through which empathy functions as a motivator and mediating factor for civic engagement.

Thus, from past research, we can see how empathy functions as a motivating factor for both in-group and out-group political engagement, but it is worth considering how this operates within an individual's intersectional identity and in relationship to critical consciousness. For example, an able-bodied black male may become more empathetic towards a white woman with disabilities (and vice versa) as their critical reflection in those domains of the other individual increase. Subsequently, these individuals may then engage in critical actions aimed at assisting the people they are empathetic towards. This growth in critical consciousness and empathy may occur through the connection of personal experiences of marginalization as part of the intersectional identity of a given individual to the perceived experience and identity of others, resulting in an increased propensity to take part in action aimed at addressing a specific domain of marginalization, even if the individual has no direct experience in that domain. It is important to note, however, that no matter how empathetic someone is towards another person, experiences of marginalization are individual. Thus, even if two people have similar experiences in the same domain, the experience is still unique to the individual and is an important concept to identify when aiming to promote greater empathy and CC development within a curriculum.

However, there are more issues with empathy development that complicate its incorporation into an education-based intervention program. First, the development of cognitive empathy can coincide with the development of emotional empathy, and studies with nurses have shown that continuous exposure to high emotions can lead to emotional burnout and physical exhaustion. Ultimately diminishing the effectiveness of the professional to provide care for the

impacted individual (Beauvais, Andreychik, & Henkel, 2017). When we consider burnout in the context of social activism, emotional burnout as a response to increased empathetic capacity could potentially diminish the motivating effect of empathy on the engagement in civic activities, because if supporting those distressed due to being marginalized causes emotional distress and physical exhaustion, individuals are more likely to abstain from the activity altogether. It is also important to note that political ideology may impact the efficacy of empathy focused education-based intervention. One study conducted by Sparkman and Eidelman (2016) found that empathy mediates the difference between political ideologies and stereotype endorsement, with liberals being more likely to report perspective taking and less endorsement of ethnic stereotypes. This finding indicates that given the political climate and attitude of a society, or the regional political climate, the efficacy of empathetic perspective taking instruction may vary and is a factor to consider when implementing an education-based intervention.

### **Social Justice Identity**

Individuals who identify as having a social justice identity are those who have a strong internalized commitment to addressing injustice and believe that social equity is an ideal goal for any society. Past research has shown that this identity may develop as part of the experience of belonging to a marginalized community or through a strong connection to another civically engaged individual (Travis & Leech, 2013). Although the development of a social justice identity is not limited to those groups in direct or close proximity to marginalization, there is a substantial gap in the literature exploring how people such as white, affluent youth, also grow to develop a strong social justice identity despite limited experiences of marginalization. Social justice identity is a more stable construct than empathy and is often compared to the stability of other worldview or political beliefs that do not change dramatically in response to increasing

education. As a result, orienting individuals towards the obtainment of a social justice identity without direct experiences of marginalization may be difficult to achieve in the environment of an educational institution and is further complicated by factors such as political climate. With this being said, however, it is included as a factor of interest in this study as another potential mediator because it is important to discern if it is modifiable skill factors, such as empathy, or more trait and belief based factors, such as a social justice identity, that mediate the relationship between critical reflection and critical action.

### **Empathy and Social Justice Identity**

With the distinct characteristics of both mediating factors described, it is also important to note the interplay between both constructs. One potential interaction is that as empathetic capacity is increased, this may increase the likelihood of the adoption of a social justice identity due to the individual's increased psychological and potentially physical investment in the struggles of groups to overcome marginalization. Previous research has shown that a significant predictor of future activism is the engagement in past activism (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). Therefore, if empathy starts individuals down the path of activism, they are likely to adopt a social justice identity along the way as they continue to engage with causes and groups they care about. On the flip side, those who already identify as having a social justice identity will likely grow their empathetic capacity for two reasons. First, the increased interaction with marginalized groups will result in increased cognitive empathetic perspective taking as a byproduct of the interpersonal interactions. Second, those with a social justice identity may purposefully take on the perspectives of others to show their support, understanding, and motivation to promote social equity through civic engagement activities, with the goal being to be more included in activist groups and behaviors that fulfill the beliefs of their social justice identity.

## Method

Data used for mediation analysis were collected as part of an ongoing longitudinal mixed-method study of critical consciousness development at the University of Washington Tacoma campus conducted by Rachel M. Hershberg, Ph.D., and her community psychology research group, of which I am a lab manager. Data for this study came from the second wave of data collection and is used with permission for these analyses.

### Participants

Data were collected from 147 undergraduate students at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) ( $Mdn_{age} = 26$ , 79.6% Female). Students were asked to self-identify their race/ethnicity; 40% identified as white, 18% as multi-racial, 10% as Latinx, 10% as Southeast Asian, and 9% as African American. Students additionally self-identified their sexual orientation; 77% as straight/heterosexual, and 17% LGBTQIA. Were asked if they identified with having a disability; 92% said No. Additionally, we asked what socioeconomic status participants identified as currently occupying; 29% Working-class, 25% Middle-class, 23% Lower Middle-class, 11% Poor, 11% Upper-Middle Class. Data were collected through a survey administered online, and participants received a \$10 Starbucks gift card as compensation for their participation in the study.

### Measures

#### BES-A

The Basic Empathy Scale in Adults (BES-A; Carré et al., 2013) is a three-factor, 20-item scale that uses a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The three factors that combine to make the total empathy scale score are Emotional Disconnection ( $\alpha = .769$ ) (e.g., My friends' emotions don't affect me much). Cognitive Empathy

( $\alpha = .892$ ) (e.g., I can usually work out when my friends are scared). And Emotional Contagion ( $\alpha = .867$ ) (e.g., I get caught up in other people's feelings easily). For this study, the combined empathy scale score was obtained from the mean of the individual items across the entire scale and demonstrated good reliability with a Cronbach alpha of .874.

### **Social Justice Identity Scale**

To assess social justice identity, we developed a three-item measure assess the level of adoption of various social justice beliefs. (Hershberg et al., 2016) using a 5-point agree/disagree Likert type response scale with possible values ranging from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree, participants responded to the following questions: stopping prejudice is important to me, sticking up for people when they are discriminated against is important to me, and I spend time thinking about inequality in society. This scale demonstrated good reliability with a Cronbach alpha of .758.

### **Critical Consciousness**

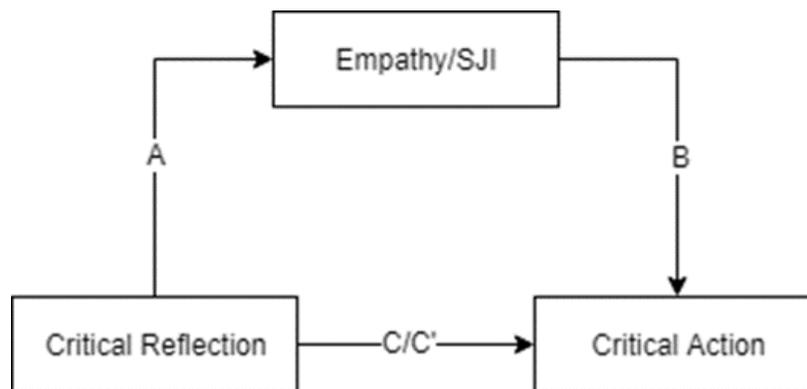
To assess Critical Consciousness (CC), we used a measure that had been created previously for use with college students on urban campuses in the United States (Hershberg et al., 2016). The scale is based on a two-component model of CC consisting of a Critical Reflection scale (CR) ( $\alpha = .852$ ) and Critical Action scale (CA) ( $\alpha = .679$ ). The CR scale is composed of six subscales that assess individual reflection levels in a variety of domains. These subscale domains are: racism ( $\alpha = .835$ ), ruralism ( $\alpha = .835$ ), ableism ( $\alpha = .888$ ), LGBTQIA discrimination ( $\alpha = .464$ ), sexism ( $\alpha = .820$ ), and classism ( $\alpha = .565$ ). The CR scale uses two different 5-point Likert scales to assess perceived levels of inequality compared to various statements (e.g., People of color have less job opportunities than white people.). Some critical reflection subscales used a 5-point untrue/true response scale ranging from 1 – Not at all true, to

5 – Completely true, and others used a 5-point agree/disagree scale ranging from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree. For some subscale items and both Likert scale types, reverse coding was used. The mean scores of all CR subscales were combined and averaged to create an overall CR scale score. The CA scale consists of items that assess an individual's average level of involvement in a variety of activities related to civic engagement over the past 12 months; Responses were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – Never to 5 – All the time (at least once a week). The activities assessed involved political, community service, social activism, and general altruism behaviors. A mean score across all activities then combined to make a CA scale score for an individual. For the analysis in this paper, CR and CA scores do not combine to make an overall CC score.

### Statistical Analysis

Figure 1.

Mediation Model for Empathy and Social Justice Identity



To assess independence and bivariate relations of study variables we used Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient ( $r$ ). After assessing correlations between associated predictor and outcome variables, and finding the fundamental statistical assumptions were met, we then proceeded to conduct statistical mediation analysis using empathy and social justice identity as mediating variables using the procedure outlined by Baron & Kenny (1986).

Following their procedure, critical reflection was first regressed onto critical action (pathway C). Second, we regressed critical reflection onto empathy in our first mediation model, and social justice identity in our second mediation model (pathway A). Third, we regressed empathy in the first model and social justice identity in the second to critical action (pathway B). Finally, critical reflection was again regressed onto critical action with empathy or social justice identity inputted into the model to assess indirect effect (pathway C'). Following this, using the unstandardized beta values calculated in the regression mentioned above equations, the statistical significance of mediation results was assessed using the Joint Test of Significance (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007), as well as both the Sobel (1982) and Aroian (1944/1947) statistical tests for mediation effect. The Sobel and Aroian tests were selected in addition to the Joint Test of Significance given their high level of performance in Monte Carlo analysis (MacKinnon, Warsi & Dwyer, 1995).

## Results

### Correlation Assessment

#### Overall scale scores.

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations for CR, CA, Empathy and Social Justice Identity Scales

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlations			
			Critical Reflection	Critical Action	Empathy	Social Justice Identity
Critical Reflection	3.63	.75	-			
Critical Action	2.81	.85	.306**	-		
Empathy	3.75	.59	.268**	.238**	-	
Social Justice Identity	4.45	.60	.572**	.238**	.311**	-

*Note.* \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results of correlation tests, as presented in Table 1., demonstrates that there are significant associations between the variables used in multiple regression analysis. This association indicates that there is a potential for significant amounts of multicollinearity between predictor variables when inputted into a multiple regression model. Despite this, the magnitude of the correlation coefficients is relatively small between most variables, with only CR and Social Justice Identity having a medium strength correlational relationship. Variable inflation factors assessed during subsequent multiple regression analysis stayed well below a value of 10, indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue when continuing through the mediation procedure. Furthermore, the results of this correlation matrix demonstrate, consistent with previous findings, an association between overall CR, CA, empathy and a social justice identity scales and that we can proceed with mediation analysis.

**Empathy, social justice identity, and critical reflection subscales.**

Table 2.

Correlations Between Empathy Scale, Social Justice Identity Scale, and CR Subscales.

*Note.* \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

CR Subscales	Empathy	Social Justice Identity
Racism	.147	.461**
LGBTQIA	.321**	.599**
Ableism	.352**	.417**
Sexism	.254**	.433**
Ruralism	.069	.373**
Classism	.143	.398**

The results of correlation analysis indicate that while social justice identity is significantly positively correlated with all subscales of critical reflection, empathy only correlates with the subscales that assess reflection levels toward LGBTQIA, Ableism, and Sexism. The strength and significance of the correlation between social justice identity and all

the CR subscales are expected given the strength of the correlation between the overall CR scale and the social justice identity scale as shown in Table 1.

### Associations with critical action items.

Table 3.

Correlations Between Empathy Scale/Subscales, Social Justice Identity, CA Scale and CA Items

	CA	CA-ACT1	CA-ACT2	CA-ACT3	CA-ACT4
Empathy	.238**	-.032	.145	.233**	.280**
Cognitive	.245**	.003	.154	.228**	.265**
Emotional Contagion	.137	-.046	.049	.161	.199*
Emotional Disconnection	.135	-.046	.116	.119	.153
Social Justice Identity	.238**	.169*	.004	.330**	.178*

*Note.* \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), \* Correlation is significant at .05 level (2-tailed).

The above table shows the results of correlation analysis conducted to see if specific scales/subscales were associated more with a “type” of action than another. Results indicate that empathy overall is associated with critical action question 3, which focused on social activism, and action question 4, which asked about “helping people you don’t know.” Similarly, cognitive empathy is also correlated to questions 3 and 4. The emotional contagion subscale is only significantly associated with question 4, helping people you do not know, but not others. Social justice identity is associated with question 1: political activities, as well as questions 3 and 4. Further, it is interesting to note that social justice identity does not associate with question 2; community service activities, reasons for this will be explored in the discussion section.

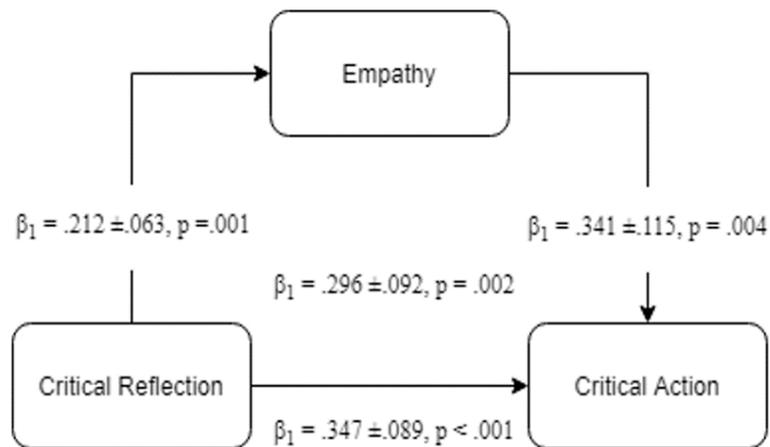
### Mediator Analysis

Critical reflection, empathy, and social justice identity all had statistically significant positive correlations with critical action. In order to analyze if critical reflection leads to critical action directly, or indirectly through the mediating variables of empathy or social justice identity two mediation analyzes were conducted using the mediation model presented in Figure 1. and the procedure outlined by Baron & Kenny (1986).

### **Empathy as mediating variable.**

Figure 2.

Path Analysis of Relationship Between CR and CA Through Empathy

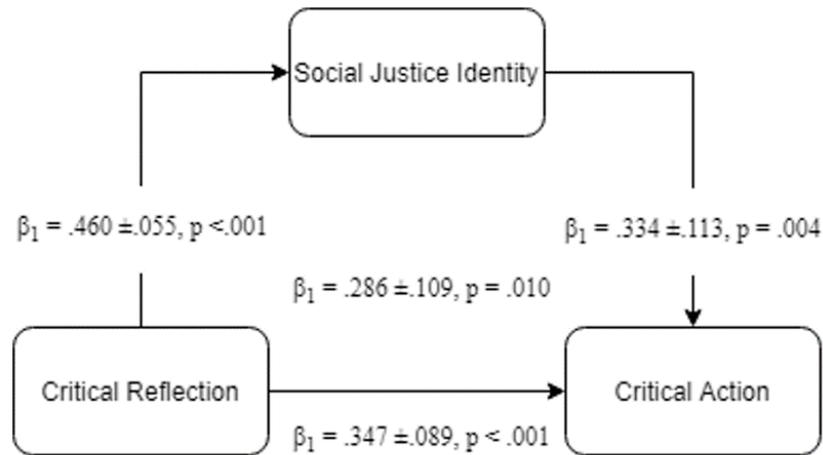


Using the mediation model above, in our first step of analysis, we found that critical reflection regressed statistically significantly to critical action. Following the assessment statistically significant relationship in step one, critical reflection was then regressed onto empathy with statistically significant results. Third, empathy was regressed onto critical action and found an additional statistically significant relationship. Lastly, a regression of critical reflection on critical action with empathy included was conducted. The difference between pathway C and C' was calculated as the indirect effect and is shown in Table 4.

### **Social justice identity as mediating variable.**

Figure 3.

Path Analysis of Relationship Between CR and CA Through Social Justice Identity



Based on previous mediation analysis, there is an established statistically significant relationship between critical reflection and critical action. Therefore, we regressed critical reflection onto social justice identity, which yielded statistically significant results. Social justice identity was then regressed onto critical action, with statistically significant results. Lastly, a regression was run between critical reflection and critical action with social justice identity included. The difference between pathway C and C' was calculated as the indirect effect and is shown in Table 4.

### Significance Testing

Table 4.

Mediation Indirect Effect, Proportion of mediation effect, and Significance Testing Results

Mediator	Indirect Effect	Proportion of mediation effect	Joint Test of Significance	Sobel Test	Aroian
Empathy	.072	20.84%	Yes	Z = 2.225 ± .033, p = .026	Z = 2.17 ± 0.033, p = .029
Social Justice Identity	.154	44.27%	Yes	Z = 2.787 ± .055, p = .005	Z = 2.769 ± .055, p = .006

Table 4. shows the result of calculating indirect effect (pathway C – pathway C’), as well as the proportion of the mediating effect ( $AB/C$  or  $1-C'/C$ ). Both mediation models passed the Joint Test of Significance, which assumes that if pathway A is significant, and pathway B is significant, the indirect effect is likely non-zero. This conclusion is further supported by the Sobel and Aroian statistical tests for indirect effect significance. The results of mediation analysis and significance testing support the conclusion that empathy is a statistically significant mediator in the relationship between critical reflection and critical action, explaining ~21% of pathway C. Additionally, analysis supports the conclusion that social justice identity is a larger mediating variable between critical reflection and critical action, explaining ~44% of pathway C in that mediation model.

### Discussion

The results of our hypothesis testing and statistical analysis produced findings consistent with previous literature on critical consciousness such as those by Diemer & Rapa (2016), supporting the validity of a two-factor model of critical consciousness based on a statistically significant relationship between critical reflection and critical action. This statistically significant association is supported through correlation analysis conducted on overall CR and CA scores, as well as the results of regression analysis conducted while following the Baron & Kenny (1986) mediation procedure. It was important to re-establish a significant association between CR and

CA before proceeding with mediation analysis involving empathy and social justice identity to reinforce the conceptual link between the two factors, as well as prove the statistical assumption needed to proceed with further analysis. With these conceptual and statistical assumptions met for the relationship between critical reflection and critical action, mediation analysis was conducted to explore possible factors that influence how an individual goes from being critically reflective to critically active. The results of our mediation analysis indicate that both empathy and social justice identity are statistically significant mediating factors to consider when assessing the relationship between critical reflection and critical action.

However, as noted in the results of calculating the proportion of mediating effect presented in Table 4., while both factors are significant, social justice identity explains much more of the relationship between critical reflection and critical action. This finding suggests that personality and identity factors have a stronger influence on the propensity to engage civically than a trait or skill-based factor such as empathy. However, as noted in the literature review, social justice identity cannot manifest itself without the individual already possessing higher levels of empathy. This is because being committed to addressing systemic inequities requires individuals to possess the empathetic capacity and skill to actively cognitively and emotionally perspective take with those individuals or communities that the individual with a social justice identity wishes to assist. Failure to do so potentially decreases the efficacy of helping behaviors manifested when an individual with a social justice identity attempts to act on and express the identification with a belief in social equity to the point where the individual no longer possesses a social justice identity. It is further interesting to note that in the results of the correlation analysis in Table 3., wherein social justice identity was not correlated with critical action item 2, which focused on community service activities, such as volunteering at a soup kitchen. This may

be because those with a social justice identity attempt to focus their efforts on actions that directly challenge the status quo. For example, the strongest correlation between a critical action item and social justice identity is for question 3, which is about engagement in social activism, which is described in the study as: “like going to a demonstration about an issue you care about, trying to get others to recycle, or sharing your opinions or beliefs through messages on your clothing and social media”. Empathy, by contrast, is an innate human trait (Gerdes & Segal, 2011) and can exist independent of an individual’s orientation to social justice.

Looking again at Table 3. empathy is correlated most strongly with critical action question 4, “Helping people you don’t know.” Suggesting that, consistent with past literature, that connections to others are an important reason given for why individuals engage civically (Borshuck, 2014; Travis & Leech, 2013). Furthermore, we note how empathy and social justice identity are linked. The only other critical action item that empathy is statistically significantly correlated with is critical action question 3, which is the same social activism question discussed in relation to social justice identity. Subsequently, while it is possible to have empathy without a social justice identity, as discussed previously, higher levels of empathy are correlated with engagement in social activism which is highly correlated with social justice identity. If we wish to increase levels of civic engagement in individuals through the critical consciousness process, we can see through the results of mediation analysis that both empathy and social justice identity are factors that influence this, with social justice identity having a more significant impact than empathy. Given that past research establishes a link between previous experiences with activism and likelihood of engaging in future activism (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998), if empathy prompts an individual to engage in activism, as mediation and correlation analysis indicate, they will be more likely to engage in that behavior again. This has the potential through the recursive process

that characterizes critical consciousness for individuals to develop a social justice identity. This development may occur through the individual process of engaging in and reflecting on the experience of participating in social activism. Through this critical consciousness process, individuals may adopt and internalize a strong commitment to addressing systemic inequalities, which as analysis shows is much more impactful a factor when considering what mediates the relationship between being reflective of inequities in society and attempting to challenge those perceived inequities to improve equity within a given societal social structure.

### **Conclusion**

Past research has demonstrated that individuals already possess some level of empathy and empathetic capacity (Gerdes & Segal, 2011) and empathy can be enhanced through instruction (Gerdes & Segal, 2011; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Furthermore, as correlation and mediation analysis indicate, empathy is connected to the levels of social activism an individual engages in. If increased experience in social activism is predictive of future activism (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998), and assuming that the recursive process of critical consciousness as outlined by Freire (1970) is taking place, this individual will continue to reflect, act, then reflect again, and so on. Throughout this experience, the individual may become even more empathetic and critically aware to the point they adopt a social justice identity, which as mediation analysis demonstrates, has higher potential in regards to the engagement in social activism. If then, empathy development potentially influences the development of a social justice identity, and the propensity of an individual to engage in activism, the development of empathetic capacity and skill can, therefore, be targeted as the precipitating factor for these other outcomes.

Educational institutions, and higher education institutions in particular, can be an environment wherein an empathy development based intervention can be administered. Many of

these higher education institutions, such as the University of Washington Tacoma, have strong social justice beliefs that inform how the institution conducts itself. If the goal of these institutions is to increase social justice and promote social equity, they can start within their classrooms to create empathetic and reflective citizens. Many campuses across the globe have courses dedicated to the study of the various issues that are assessed in our critical reflection measure: sexism, classism, racism, ableism, ruralism, and LGBTQIA discrimination, if these same classes also prompted the development of empathy at the same time by framing readings and class discussions with an active cognitive/emotional perspective taking lens through a simple phrase such as “As we read this, imagine what they may be thinking or the emotions they might be feeling”, this could potentially increase the likelihood of students to go beyond reflection of inequity in the classroom to addressing those inequalities out in society through social activism. While there may be barriers based on institutional and political ideology or access to education in a society, the basic progression can still occur: social activism leads to social change, social change usually results in increased social equity. As more people in more societies exercise their power of social activism as much as possible, this has the potential to make lasting social changes and a net increase in equity around the globe.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There were a few limitations in regards to this study. For one, we limited ourselves to the analysis of one wave of a longitudinal research project, resulting in a limited sample size of 147 participants. Future research will be looking at the same processes across multiple waves to establish validity further, and assess critical consciousness, empathy, and social justice identity development across multiple time points. Another limitation of this study involved the availability of statistical procedures in assessing the significance of the mediation effect.

Bootstrapping methods would have been more robust, with a higher power, but were unavailable for these analyses. Furthermore, later analysis will incorporate control variables such as age into regression analysis in an attempt to further verify regression analysis results and their subsequent conclusions.

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