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The Relationship between Critical Consciousness and Subjective Well-being

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Senior Honors Project

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## Abstract

The premise of this research examined the relationship between critical consciousness and subjective well-being in college aged men and women between 18-25 years old. Critical consciousness is the ability to critically evaluate forms of oppression and privilege, as well as actively seeking to implement change. Past research has found that forms of oppression can impact ones thoughts, behaviors, and worldview. Subjective well-being pertains to one's personal outlook on their level of happiness. The hypothesis states that lower levels of critical consciousness will be negatively related to well-being, while higher levels of critical consciousness will be positively related to well-being. Examining scores from the Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI), a nine-item scale, was used to assess critical consciousness. The scores that participants received ranged from the pre-critical stage (individuals are oblivious to oppression and inequality), beginning critical stage (individuals begin to recognize oppression and inequality), critical stage (individuals have a solid sense of critical consciousness), and post critical stage (individuals take action in response to oppression and inequality). Subjective well-being was conceptualized according to participants' scores from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANES) and the Flourishing Scale (FS). The results were analyzed using a multiple regression framework, in which levels of critical consciousness did not adequately influence ones rating of subjective well-being. The effect of critical consciousness on subjective well-being is discussed in order to advance future research in this area.

### The Relationship between Critical Consciousness and Subjective Well-being

In today's society, it is evident that individuals are susceptible to forms of oppression that can impact one's thoughts, behaviors, and worldview. Critical consciousness is the ability to critically evaluate forms of oppression and privilege, as well as actively seeking to implement change (Freire, 1990; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). It is not uncommon for individuals to be low in critical consciousness; however, those that are high in critical consciousness use their awareness to create a change in society's system of oppression. In order to increase critical consciousness, individuals must first develop effective critical thinking skills. Being cognizant and having an understanding of societal forces that induce ideas of superiority and inferiority can be instilled in both the oppressed and the oppressor to enforce change.

When determining an individual's level of critical consciousness, taking their level of subjective well-being into consideration is important in order to determine if the interaction significantly affects daily functioning or one's outlook on life. The concept of well-being extends beyond one's typical health status and encompasses additional aspects. The primary basis of subjective well-being pertains to individuals' affective and cognitive evaluations of their life (Diener, 2000); essentially, it is an individual's personal outlook on their level of happiness. In addition, well-being can embody one's perception of their career, marriage, relationships with others or progress toward achieving one's personal goals (Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998). There is no specific standard or path that an individual must fulfill in order to be considered satisfied and happy with one's life. However, it is important to recognize that one's personal rating of life satisfaction and happiness may affect their level of critical consciousness. For instance, those that are satisfied with life may recognize that improvements are necessary in order to eliminate feelings of inferiority in society, in which satisfaction about their efforts to make a difference

manifests. On the other hand, those that are less satisfied may believe that the world is a just and fair place, but have lower levels of satisfaction in regards to marginalized groups that may surpass them. Diener (2000) states that an individual's level of subjective well-being is higher when they have more enjoyable life experiences and activities, with significantly fewer unpleasant experiences. Well-being also embodies feeling positive or negative about oneself. Furthermore, the way one views their relationships with others, quality of life—in terms of having meaning and purpose in life—and feelings of competence stand as factors that can also impact one's critical consciousness level. Diener (2000) stresses the importance of individuals not becoming consumed with seeking intense pleasurable experiences. To explain, if individuals only seek above average pleasurable experiences to feel satisfied with life, they may view moderately pleasurable activities as unsatisfying even when they are not. It is essential to recognize that one's level of well-being is not constant throughout the lifespan. Depending on certain experiences throughout one's life and even personality factors, individuals are capable of increasing or decreasing in their level of happiness.

Analogous to subjective well-being, and individual's level of critical consciousness can increase as well. In a study that aimed to cultivate critical thinking, or sociopolitical development, young African American men partook in a workshop to raise awareness of societal forces that influence oppression (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002). In order to assess the development of critical consciousness, a five-stage model of sociopolitical development was utilized: acritical stage (belief that the world is fair), adaptive stage (awareness of inequity and belief that change cannot occur), pre-critical stage (favor of the previous stage in combating injustice develops), critical stage (individuals become cognizant of issues and want to contribute to change) and the liberation stage (individuals implement change for social justice) (Watts,

Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). During the eight session study the participants were required to watch popular music videos and movies, as well as discuss the content in relation to how they could create a change in their respective communities. In an attempt to develop their critical consciousness, the media components were used in conjunction with small interactive sessions that encouraged in-depth responses and discussions of various questions (i.e., what do you think about the attitude he [someone in a video] has toward women). The five component coaching technique used with the participants paralleled with the five-stage model of sociopolitical development. The results revealed that the verbal responses showed an increase in critical thinking skills, which positively impacted their critical consciousness. It was also posited that as critical consciousness increases in the younger generation, they are more likely to take action against oppression (Watts et al., 2002). Overall, the results suggest that critical consciousness can develop in oppressed groups—young African American males—and lead them to want to make a change in society.

Since critical consciousness stands as an under researched area of focus that still requires extensive study—yet has been shown to increase in participants in supportive studies—checking the reliability of the scale was important in order to advance future research in this area. In order to accurately examine levels of critical consciousness, for prevention purposes and to be used in clinical settings, researches sought to provide validity for the Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI; Thomas, Barrie, Brunner, Clawson, Hewitt, Jeremie-Brink, Rowe-Johnson, 2014). To explain, participants from two colleges—a predominantly White institution and a Historically Black College—were recruited to partake in the study, in which their responses from the survey were utilized to assess levels of critical consciousness. It was found that the participants increased in critical consciousness between the beginning and critical stages, with a higher

increase for African American participants. Further analyses revealed that the CCI is an adequate measure of critical consciousness. Thomas et al. (2014) suggests that it is important for individuals to understand and be aware of their level of critical consciousness in order to determine where they fit into society, as well as aid them in becoming active and engaged global citizens.

It has been posited that critical consciousness stands as a protective factor against forms of oppression (Thomas et al., 2014); therefore, it is important to examine its relationship with subjective well-being. The current research aims to examine the level of awareness college aged men and women have concerning issues of oppression and how it can impact their outlook on life. For instance, individuals that are high on critical consciousness understand that oppression exists and actively seek to end its negative impact on society. In addition, these individuals may feel more satisfied with life knowing that they are working to assist in ending oppression. On the other hand, individuals low in critical consciousness may not view the world as an unfair place and attribute success to hard work and not privilege. These individuals may feel less satisfied with life when marginalized groups are afforded opportunities that affect their personal advancement. It is evident that subjective well-being stands as an important factor because it can influence several aspects of individuals lives. Diener et al. (1998) found that college students rated life satisfaction a 6.21 and happiness a 6.39 on a 7-point scale, in which 7 was considered extraordinarily important and valuable.

Similar to the findings from Watts et al. (2002)—which found an increase in African American men's level of critical consciousness—I believe the outcome of the current study will be similar. Likewise, the findings from Diener et al. (1998), in which participants rated life satisfaction and happiness rather high, are predicted to yield similar results in the current study.

I hypothesize that lower levels of critical consciousness will be negatively related to subjective well-being, whereas higher levels of critical consciousness will be positively related to subjective well-being.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Seventy-one undergraduate students (N = 71; 12 men, 58 women, and 1 transgender individual) participated in this experiment. The HPR systems website was utilized to launch the survey on critical consciousness and subjective well-being. The respondents were predominantly White (81.7%), followed by African Americans (8.5%), Biracial (2.8%), Asian Americans (2.8%), Multiracial (1.4%), and Other (2.8%). Information regarding the survey was posted online and distributed by word of mouth to potential participants in various courses. The participants volunteered to participate, but were required to be from the same cohort of emerging adulthood—between the ages of 18-25 years old. Participants were not compensated financially, but were able to receive extra credit toward their respective psychology course.

### **Instruments**

The primary scale that was utilized to assess levels of critical consciousness is known as the Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI). The CCI is a 9-item measure using a Guttman scale, which focuses on respondent's thoughts about themselves and a variety of situations pertaining to equity and justice in society (refer to appendix A). A sample item states: 1a. "I believe that the world is basically fair," 1b. "I believe that the world is basically fair but others believe that it is unfair," 1c. "I believe that the world is unfair for some people," 1d. "I believe that the world is unfair, and I make sure to treat others fairly" (Thomas et al., 2014). Each letter represents a specific level of critical consciousness that pertains to sociopolitical development: A. Pre-



critical, B. Beginning Critical, C. Critical, D. Post Critical. The Cronbach alpha for the 9-items was found to have moderate internal consistency ( $\alpha = .75$ )

Three subscales were utilized to assess overall subjective well-being. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) is a 5-item measure using a Likert scale. Each item (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”) is rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with a rating of 4 (*neither agree nor disagree*) suggesting a neutral perspective (Kobau, Snizek, Sack, Lucas, & Burns, 2010). The Cronbach alpha for the 5-items was found to have strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .88$ )

The Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) is a 12-item measure using a Likert-type scale. The scale consists of 6 positive feelings (e.g. positive, good, pleasant) and six negative feelings (e.g. negative, bad, unpleasant). Each item is rated on a scale from 1 (*very rarely or never*) to 5 (*very often or always*), with a rating of 3 (*sometimes*) suggesting a neutral perspective (Diener, Wirtz, Tov, Kim-Prieto, Choi, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2009). It was found that the Cronbach alpha for the 12-items had weak internal consistency ( $\alpha = .47$ )

The Flourishing Scale (FS) is an 8-item measure using a Likert scale. Each item (e.g. “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life”) is rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with a rating of 4 (*neither agree nor disagree*) suggesting a neutral perspective (Diener et al., 2009). The Cronbach alpha for the 8-items was found to have strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ )

## **Apparatus**

Participants were able to access the survey from either a laptop or desktop computer. In order to accurately document the data, a SPSS Statistic Program was used after the experiment concluded.

## Results

The primary question of interest was how much variance in subjective well-being scores could be explained by scores on a measure of critical consciousness. It was hypothesized that lower levels of critical consciousness would be negatively related to subjective well-being, whereas higher levels of critical consciousness would be positively related to subjective well-being. Bivariate correlations and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between the CCI and each subscale of subjective well-being. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis results. It was revealed that the variance between the subjective well-being scores and scores from the CCI did not reach significance. The SWLS measure predicted 16% of variance ( $R = .125$ ,  $F(1, 68) = 1.07$ ,  $p > .05$ ), the SPANE measure predicted 16% of variance ( $R = .128$ ,  $F(1, 68) = 1.13$ ,  $p > .05$ ), and the FS measure predicted 23% of variance ( $R = .150$ ,  $F(1, 68) = 1.57$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

In examining how each participant's level of critical consciousness—pre-critical, beginning critical, critical, and post critical—affected their subjective well-being score, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Contrary to the hypothesis, when levels of critical consciousness were compared to subjective well-being scores, the results did not reach significance for any of the subjective well-being measures. Refer to Table 2 for a depiction of the standard deviations and means. No participants scored in the pre-critical stage, which is the belief that the world is a just and fair place for everyone. The analysis between the three remaining stages when compared to the SWLS measure did not reach significance ( $R = .184$ ,  $F(3, 65) = .76$ ,  $p > .05$ ), nor for the SPANE measure ( $R = .287$ ,  $F(3, 65) = 1.94$ ,  $p > .05$ ), or the FS measure ( $R = .241$ ,  $F(3, 65) = 1.34$ ,  $p > .05$ ). However, an interesting finding was the negative relationship between the beginning critical stage and the post critical stage,  $r = -.127$ ,  $p > .05$ .

### **Discussion**

The current study sought to investigate how much variance in subjective well-being scores could be explained by scores on the critical consciousness inventory, revealing that the results failed to reach significance. The basic finding was that levels of critical consciousness do not adequately influence ones rating of subjective well-being. The disproportionate amount of males to females, as well as ethnic demographics of predominantly White individuals, limited the ability to examine whether their scores could have reached significance when compared.

One of the primary limitations of this study was the small sample size, which drastically influenced the reliability of the scales. In addition, since the participants were not required to answer every question before continuing, several participant's scores had to be removed. This decreased the already small sample size to a total of 71 respondents. By increasing the amount of participants, the higher collection of data would have made the study more accurate. Taking this matter into consideration in future studies may lead to better results. Also, a third variable that was not recorded in the present study—for instance, personality characteristics—may be accounted for in later research and influence the outcome of the results. Furthermore, response bias is another factor that may have impacted the results. Attempting to appear more socially desirable may have tempted participants to select options that did not reflect their true feelings. Considering all factors that could influence an individuals' level of critical consciousness and rating of subjective well-being is essential in order to advance research in this area.

Overall, these findings are important because it may lead to improvements in future studies. Educators, researchers, clinicians, and policy makers can better serve the needs of emerging adults through continuous research on how to effectively measure levels of critical consciousness and subjective well-being. Furthermore, interesting results may be found in

examining critical consciousness and subjective well-being between different racial groups in emerging adulthood. Perhaps negative stereotypes and conflict can be reduced as critical consciousness increases. Since higher levels of critical consciousness are associated with an action stage, further research in this area may create ways to motivate individuals from various ethnic backgrounds to take action against inequity and injustice. Critical consciousness and subjective well-being are essential aspects of one's life; therefore, it is important that society becomes more cognizant of how both can affect everyday life functioning.

**Appendix A**Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI)

- 1a. I believe that the world is basically fair.  
1b. I believe that the world is basically fair but others believe that it is unfair.  
1c. I believe that the world is unfair for some people.  
1d. I believe that the world is unfair, and I make sure to treat others fairly.
- 2a. I believe that all people are treated equally.  
2b. I believe that some people don't take advantage of opportunities given to them and blame others instead.  
2c. I believe that some groups are discriminated against.  
2d. I work to make sure that people are treated equally and are given equal chances.
- 3a. I think that education gives everyone an equal chance to do well.  
3b. I think that education gives everyone who works hard an equal chance.  
3c. I think that the educational system is unequal.  
3d. I think that the educational system needs to be changed in order for everyone to have an equal chance.
- 4a. I believe people get what they deserve.  
4b. I believe that some people are treated badly but there are ways that they can work to be treated fairly.  
4c. I believe that some people are treated badly because of oppression.  
4d. I feel angry that some people are treated badly because of oppression and I often do something to change it.
- 5a. I think all social groups are respected.  
5b. I think the social groups that are not respected have done things that lead people to think badly of them.
- 5c. I think people do not respect members of some groups based on stereotypes.  
5d. I am respectful of people in all social groups, and I speak up when others are not.  
6a. I don't notice when people make prejudiced comments.  
6b. I notice when people make prejudiced comments and it hurts me.  
6c. It hurts me when people make prejudiced comments but I am able to move on.  
6d. When someone makes a prejudiced comment, I tell them that what they said is hurtful.
- 7a. When people tell a joke that makes fun of a social group, I laugh and don't really think about it.  
7b. When people tell a joke that makes fun of a social group, I laugh but also feel uncomfortable.  
7c. When people tell a joke that makes fun of a social group, I realize that the joke is based on a stereotype.  
7d. I tell people when I feel that their joke was offensive.
- 8a. I don't see much oppression in this country.  
8b. I feel hopeless and overwhelmed when I think about oppression in this country.  
8c. I feel like oppression in this country is less than in the past and will continue to change.  
8d. I actively work to support organizations which help people who are oppressed.
- 9a. I don't feel bad when people say they have been oppressed.  
9b. I feel sad or angry when experiencing or seeing oppression.

9c. I often become sad or angry when experiencing or seeing oppression, but I find ways to cope with my feelings.

9d. I work to protect myself from negative feelings when acts of oppression happen.

### Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 - 7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

- 7 - Strongly agree
- 6 - Agree
- 5 - Slightly agree
- 4 - Neither agree nor disagree
- 3 - Slightly disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly disagree

- 
- \_\_\_\_\_ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The conditions of my life are excellent.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am satisfied with my life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

- 31 - 35 Extremely satisfied
- 26 - 30 Satisfied
- 21 - 25 Slightly satisfied
- 20 Neutral
- 15 - 19 Slightly dissatisfied
- 10 - 14 Dissatisfied
- 5 - 9 Extremely dissatisfied

### Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE)

Please think about what you have been doing and experiencing during the past four weeks. Then report how much you experienced each of the following feelings, using the scale below. For each item, select a number from 1 to 5, and indicate that number on your response sheet.

1. Very Rarely or Never
2. Rarely
3. Sometimes
4. Often
5. Very Often or Always

Positive

Negative

Good  
 Bad  
 Pleasant  
 Unpleasant  
 Happy  
 Sad  
 Afraid  
 Joyful  
 Angry  
 Contented

Scoring: The measure can be used to derive an overall affect balance score, but can also be divided into positive and negative feelings scales.

Positive Feelings (SPANE-P): Add the scores, varying from 1 to 5, for the six items: positive, good, pleasant, happy, joyful, and contented. The score can vary from 6 (lowest possible) to 30 (highest positive feelings score).

Negative Feelings (SPANE-N): Add the scores, varying from 1 to 5, for the six items: negative, bad, unpleasant, sad, afraid, and angry. The score can vary from 6 (lowest possible) to 30 (highest negative feelings score).

Affect Balance (SPANE-B): The negative feelings score is subtracted from the positive feelings score, and the resultant difference score can vary from -24 (unhappiest possible) to 24 (highest affect balance possible). A respondent with a very high score of 24 reports that she or he rarely or never experiences any of the negative feelings, and very often or always has all of the positive feelings.

### Flourishing Scale (FS)

Below are 8 statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the 1–7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by indicating that response for each statement.

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| • 7 - Strongly agree             | _____ I lead a purposeful and meaningful life                               |
| • 6 - Agree                      | _____ My social relationships are supportive and rewarding                  |
| • 5 - Slightly agree             | _____ I am engaged and interested in my daily activities                    |
| • 4 - Neither agree nor disagree | _____ I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others       |
| • 3 - Slightly disagree          | _____ I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me |
| • 2 - Disagree                   | _____ I am a good person and live a good life                               |
| • 1 - Strongly disagree          | _____ I am optimistic about my future                                       |
|                                  | _____ People respect me   |

Scoring: Add the responses, varying from 1 to 7, for all eight items. The possible range of scores is from 8 (lowest possible) to 56 (highest PWB possible). A high score represents a person with many psychological resources and strengths.

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### Appendix B

Table 1

*Summary Statistics: Correlations and Multiple Regression Analyses of the CCI and Subjective Well-Being Scales*

Multiple Regression Weights					
Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation with CCI	b	$\beta$
<b>CCI</b>	25.04	4.52			
<b>SWLS</b>	23.07	5.27	-.125	26.695	-.125
<b>SPANE</b>	39.77	3.96	.128	36.975	.128
<b>FS</b>	39.44	4.54	.150	35.652	.150

Table 2

*Mean Number of Critical Consciousness Stage and Standard Deviations*

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Beginning Critical	.26	.44
Critical	.69	.47
Post Critical	.43	.20