

Critical Reflection as an Antidote for Oppression

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Collective action is an action(s) taken together by a group of people with a common goal. It is one possible response to the stigmatization and oppression toward social minorities.

Research (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) has examined participation in

collective action for minority rights among members of

Figure 1 Photograph by Public Domain Pictures, Pixabay. CCO.

oppressed groups. It is also important to explore the psychological dynamics of members of dominant groups who are willing to participate in collective action on behalf of oppressed groups (Iyer & Ryan, 2009; Russell, 2011).

“Critical reflection not only allows people from oppressed groups to understand how their oppression experiences can be connected to larger structures of inequality, but also enables people from dominant groups to acknowledge the power brought by their privileged identities.”

It is intriguing to understand why members of dominant groups support equal rights for oppressed groups and eradicate group-based inequality since their group would not necessarily be better-off after the action (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Smith & Tyler, 1996).

Highlights

Critical reflection is associated with lower levels of internalized oppression and higher levels of collective efficacy.

Critical reflection can liberate people from oppressive ideologies and empower them to resist social injustice.

Understanding the motivation underlying collective action in both oppressed and dominant groups is crucial for building solidarity for systemic changes (Mallett, Huntsinger, Sinclair, & Swim, 2008).

This study examined critical reflection as an antecedent of collective action among LGBT and cisgender heterosexual individuals. Critical reflection is a reasoning process where individuals make meaning out of experience through writing, talking, or creating. We examined the liberating and empowering effects of critical reflection on collective action in LGBT and cisgender heterosexual individuals in Hong Kong. As diversity and critical consciousness are rarely discussed in the mainstream society of Hong Kong, this study investigated how critical reflection catalyzes individuals to take collection action against social oppression and injustice.

Methods

This paper investigated the liberating and empowering effects of critical reflection on collective action participation in a cross-sectional study in 1,050 LGBT individuals (Study 1) and a prospective longitudinal study in 428 cisgender heterosexual individuals (Study 2) in Hong Kong, where there has been a proliferation of political debate and collective action surrounding LGBT rights in recent years. Participants were recruited to complete a questionnaire on critical reflection, internalized oppression/domination, collective efficacy, and collective action for LGBT rights.

Results

- Critical reflection was associated with lower levels of internalized oppression/domination and higher levels of collective efficacy, which in turn were associated with greater intentions for and participation in collective action for LGBT rights.
- The liberating and empowering effects of critical reflection on collective action participation were found in both LGBT individuals (members of oppressed groups) and cisgender heterosexual individuals (members of dominant groups).
- Critical reflection is a resource to build resistance to social injustice by liberating people from oppressive ideologies and empowering them to take collective action to challenge oppression.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Community psychology emphasizes “the importance of the social context of human experience in understanding human problems, the need to work for social change, a commitment to working collaboratively, and a respect for diversity” (Harper & Schneider, 2003, p. 251). The fundamental assumption of our work is that many of the adverse conditions and discrimination that LGBT individuals face are structurally rooted. In order to liberate LGBT individuals from oppressive ideologies and empower them to resist social injustice, it is necessary to cultivate critical consciousness, which can drive them to undertake collective action for LGBT rights.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: This study is one of the first to examine critical consciousness among people from dominant groups (i.e., cisgender heterosexual individuals). It has expanded the understanding of critical reflection from reflective analysis of oppressive experiences to the recognition of oneself as the perpetrators of oppression (Jones, 2010).

Practice: Community psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other frontline professionals should be equipped with critical consciousness so that they can have the competence and humility to work with clients with oppressive backgrounds (Nicotera & Kang, 2009). Critical reflection can allow frontline practitioners to gain greater recognition of the ways in which structural forces produce health and social inequality.

Social Action: The findings can inform civil society organizations and advocacy groups on the ways to engage people in collective action to advocate for LGBT rights. First, critical reflection is a powerful vehicle for mobilizing sexual and gender minority individuals to join collective action. In order to drive collective action, it is important to create and open conversations about power and oppression surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity, so that LGBT individuals can gain insights into how their adversities are perpetuated by injustice at a structural level. Second, community interventions can be implemented to raise public awareness of the oppression suffered by the marginalized groups in society and increase knowledge about how individuals can leverage their privileged identities to eradicate unjust social arrangement (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014).

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