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**Critical consciousness and School-Based Family Counseling:
“Seeing” the pathogen in order to dismantle
the pump of oppression**

Lance C. Smith, The University of Vermont, USA

Racism, classism, heterosexism, sexism, genderism and abilityism are powerful and pervasive forms of oppression that result in inequitable social conditions that negatively impact children’s success in school. In this paper the author will call on school-based family counselors to develop the critical consciousness necessary to recognize and interrupt oppression, both within and beyond the family and school systems. To that end the author will (a) review the School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) literature in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model, (b) define the construct of critical consciousness, and (c) offer a case vignette that illustrates how critical consciousness might apply to a the SBFC meta-model that addresses Bronfenbrenner’s exosystemic and macrosystemic levels.

Keywords: School-Based Family Counseling, critical consciousness, social justice, diversity, ecological counseling

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lance Smith, 102 Mann Hall, The University of Vermont, Burlington, Vt. 05405, USA. (lance.smith@uvm.edu).

Critical consciousness and School-Based Family Counseling: “Seeing” the pathogen in order to dismantle the pump of oppression

Throughout the summer of 1854 cholera was sweeping through the greater London area. It was the fourth epidemic in a period of 20 years. During the month of August, a particularly violent strain broke out in the neighborhood of Soho, claiming the lives of 12.8% of the neighborhood in a matter of days. Physician John Snow, upon interviewing the families of the victims, determined that the water pump on the corner of Broad Street and Cambridge Street was the epicenter of the outbreak. With the aid of what was considered a radical tool at the time - a microscope - Dr. Snow examined the water from the pump and determined that it was the carrier for the disease. Upon advocating with reluctant city officials, the handle from the water pump was removed. Subsequently, the spread of cholera dramatically stopped. In just 20 years cholera had claimed the lives of over 10,000 citizens and, as it turns out, the malevolent agent was virtually invisible and located within a vital community resource (Brody, Rip, Vinten-Johansen, Paneth, & Rachman, 2000).

The London cholera epidemic of 1854 would have claimed far more lives had Dr. John Snow focused solely on treating individuals and families. The lesson here for school-based family counselors (SBFCs) is that, whether the threat to human wellness and development is viral or psycho/social, no systemic disorder affecting humankind has ever been brought under control by treating a single family (Albee, 1982). Community psychologists, critical psychologists, feminist counseling scholars, Queer Theory counseling scholars, disability rights counseling scholars, and multicultural/social justice counseling scholars are calling for SBFCs and related mental health professionals to extend the locus of their work beyond individual students and families, and to address cultural systemic forces that harm students and families from traditionally under-represented and marginalized groups (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Lewis, Ratts, Paladino, & Toporek, 2011; Lillis, O’Donohue, Cucciare, & Lillis, 2005; Smith, Shin, & Officer, 2012; Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). However, in order to engage with and ultimately interrupt harmful systemic forces, SBFCs, like Dr. Snow, need to first have a tool to “see” the pathogens that are virtually invisible and infused throughout shared community resources. Dr. Snow had a microscope. SBFCs have critical consciousness.

The purpose of this article is to offer the construct of critical consciousness as the means by which SBFCs may identify damaging forces in our culture that negatively affect the health, wellness and psycho-social development of students and families from traditionally under-represented and marginalized groups. First, this article will review the SBFC literature, relate it to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model, and underscore the limitations of a SBFC body of literature that focuses exclusively on microsystemic issues. Then, the author will define and unpack the construct of critical consciousness. Finally, the author will offer a case vignette that presents a picture of how a critically consciousness SBFCs will necessarily extend their work beyond the microsystem, and into the exosystemic and macrosystemic levels.

School-Based Family Counseling

SBFC is a model of counseling that “. . . integrates school counseling and family counseling models within a broad based systems meta-model that is used to conceptualize the child's problems in the context of all his or her interpersonal networks: family, peer group, classroom, school (teacher, principal, other students), and community.” (Gerrard, 2008, p. 1, see Figure 1).

The goal of SBFC is to promote success in school by working effectively with a child’s family in order to foster positive change within the child (See Figure 1). This model has garnered international attention and has been used to support learning, emotional and behavioral development for students in Singapore (Chong, Lee, Tan, Wong, & Yeo, 2013), Macao (van Schalkwyk, 2013), Hong Kong (King, 2012; Luk-Fong, 2013), the Philippines (Tarroja & Fernando, 2013), Australia (Reupert & Maybery, 2010), Singapore (Low, 2015), the United Kingdom (Adams-Langley, 2013/2014), and Alaska’s indigenous population (Morotti, 2010).

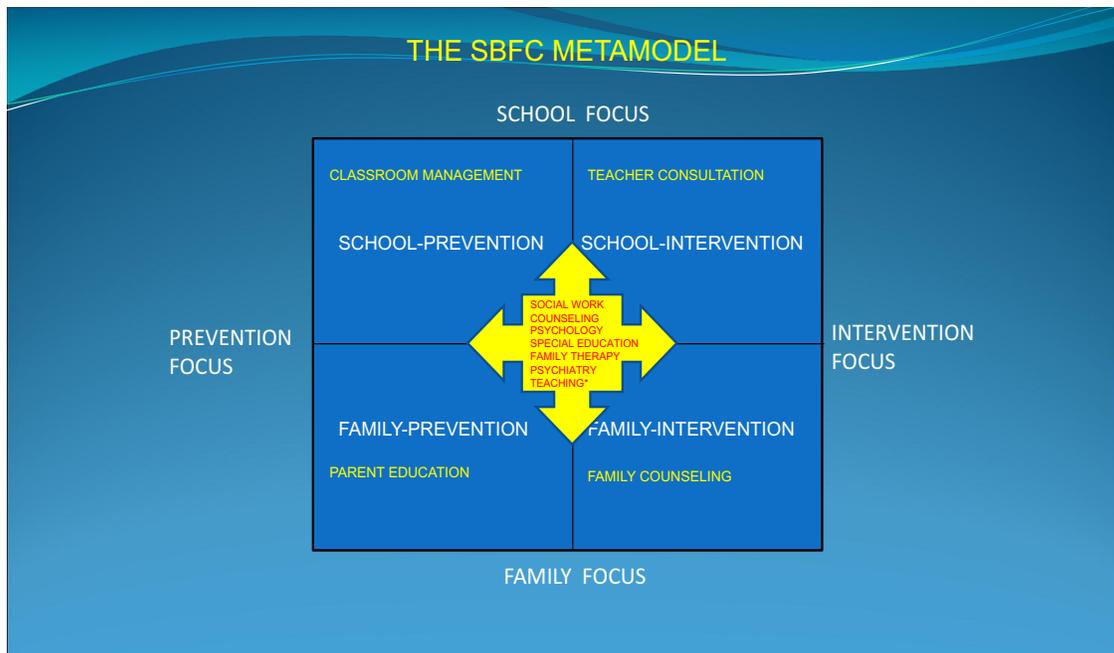


Figure 1 The SBFC meta-model

Historically, the practice of SBFC has focused on what Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model defines as the microsystemic level (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), that being prevention and intervention activities within the systems of the family and the school (Carter & Evans, 2008; Hernandez, 2016; Soriano & Gerrard, 2013). Bullying, drop-out prevention, maladaptive diagnosis of psycho-educational disorders, and racial disparities in suspension rates are examples of microsystemic challenges that have been addressed by SBFC practitioner scholars (Cooper-Haber & Sanchez, 2013; Hernandez, 2016; Nicoll, 2015). However, in order to more effectively promote educational and social/emotional development within children, especially children from traditionally marginalized groups, SBFCs need to expand their ecological perception beyond the microsystem, and attend to the exosystem and macrosystem as well (See Figure 2).

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model

Within Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model the exosystem is understood as those community resources - local, state and national governments, state departments of education, the criminal justice system, health care systems - that have an indirect but commanding effect upon the lives of children and families (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The public water system within the city of London in 1854 falls within the exosystem. The Board of Guardians of St. James Parish, London, the local

governing body responsible for the water pumps in Soho, along with the London Board of Health, represented exosystemic forces that played a significant role in addressing the 19th century cholera epidemic.

The macrosystem refers to the assumptive beliefs and dominant cultural discourses within a society that influence all the other systems. In 19th century England the etiology of cholera was informed by the dominant discourse of divine intervention; i.e. God caused cholera, therefore intervention was beyond the reach of science or medicine. In addition, deep cultural beliefs about the vulgarity and unseemliness of discussing issues of hygiene, human defecation and fecal matter shut down potentially generative conversations, contributing an additional barrier to the effective treatment of cholera. Both of these dominant discourses had a powerful, structural effect on: a) allowing the deadly pathogen to remain un-identified; b) informing the deep denial that was expressed by British officials and policy makers, and c) undergirding public resistance to change. For purposes of this article, examples of harmful discourses within U.S. society that misidentify the roots of our students’ struggles, and effectively shut down potentially generative conversations that would aid students and families from traditionally under-represented groups are the myth of meritocracy (Liu, 2011), heteropatriarchy (Smith, 2017), the medical model of disability (Fisher & Goodley, 2007), the good/bad racism binary (Kitching, 2011) and color-blind white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gillborne, 2005).

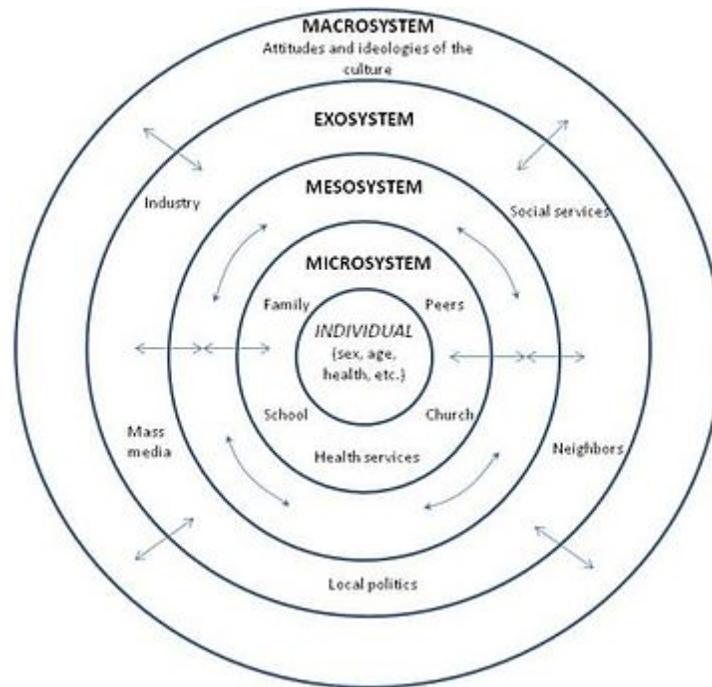


Figure 2 Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model

Critical consciousness: The tool for seeing

Attuning one's ecological perception to the dominant discourses that impede the academic, social and emotional development of students and families requires critical consciousness (CC). One's degree of CC operationalizes one's ability to identify systemic and institutionalized inequities operating in society - such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, genderism, abilityism and classism - and concomitantly gain the motivation and skills to dismantle those structures (Shin, Ezeofor, Smith, Welch, & Goodrich, 2016). CC begins with the assumption that members of both dominant, privileged social groups as well as members of non-dominant, marginalized groups are socialized to feel comfortable in relations of domination and subordination rather than in equality (See Critical Theory; Kincheloe, 2008; Smith, 2013). Developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, CC or 'conscientização' promotes the idea that if oppressed and oppressor groups can learn to critically identify the dehumanizing social conditions that marginalize some and privilege others, the plight of the oppressed will then be understood as socially constructed rather than immutable. Social injustice is not the result of unalterable scientific laws, nor essentialized biological deficits within social groups (Johnson, 2006). It has been strategically manufactured by the powerful for centuries (Baldwin, 2013). Once communities are equipped with an understanding that societal constraints and systemic inequality are designed by people, the seeds of empowerment may be planted. As one's understanding of oppressive forces becomes more nuanced and complex, resolve to challenge oppressive systems and construct a more equitable society emerges and develops (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016).

For decades now, social justice scholars have criticized the fields of counseling and psychology for ignoring problematic structural and systemic forces that perpetuate social injustices (Albee, 2000; Vera & Speight, 2003). Through strict adherence to intra-psychic and intra-familial conceptualizations of challenges that stem from institutional and cultural oppression, some scholars suggest that counselors and related mental health professionals are unknowingly complicit in the maintenance of such structures (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010; Ratts, Anthony, & Santos, 2010; Smith & Geroski, 2014). Somewhat surprisingly, there has been little integration between the social justice counseling literature and Freire's conscientização. The concept of CC may be the ideal tool to employ with beneficent, well-intended SBFCs to foster their ability to see the various forms of psycho/social subordination that harm students and families from traditionally under-represented groups.

Case vignette: Applying CC to the SBFC meta-model

In order to unpack how CC might foster more effective prevention and intervention work by SBFCs, the author will now apply CC to the SBFC meta-model by examining a fictitious, yet contextually authentic case vignette that the author has encountered frequently within the USA.

Colin is a 6th grade boy of African descent who was adopted by his two white moms, Beth and Rachael. Colin attends middle school within a predominantly white school district. Colin's mothers know him to be an extremely bright, affable, respectful 12-year old who is loving and responsive at home. Recently, Colin experienced his first in-school suspension for fighting. His teacher perceives Colin as an average student, who vacillates between moods of engaged interest and disengaged apathy. At lunch and on the playground, Colin prefers to associate with the only other boy of color in the school, who happens to be in a different class.

Within the United States, Black children represent 17.1% of all public school students, but account for 37.4% of total suspensions (Gonzalez, 2012). SBFCs have an important role to play in this issue as frequent suspensions have been correlated with academic failure, dropout, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Kline, 2016; Payne & Welch, 2015). Indeed, Cooper-Haber & Sanchez (2013) brought SBFC to bear on this problem, though solely through a microsystemic lens. As the author will now demonstrate, beneficent well-intended SBFCs without CC are likely to focus solely on microsystemic work, will lack the ability to see Colin's suspension as a possible outcome of macrosystemic pathogens, and will therefore not only be limited in their ability to help Colin and his family, but will also leave the pump of racial oppression operational.

With regards to racially inequitable suspension rates in schools, the macrosystemic discourse of white supremacy is the pathogen that is infecting much of U.S. society and other nations as well. The discourse of white supremacy is understood as those deep seated cultural beliefs and power relations that sustain and disguise white racial hegemony. White supremacy is conceived as a comprehensive condition whereby the interests and perceptions of white persons are centered within our culture and assumed as normal (Gillborn, 2006). Examples of narratives rooted in the discourse of white supremacy that sustain inequitable suspension rates are:

- Black children and families have only themselves to blame for this inequitable distribution of punitive discipline (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).
- Black parents do not have high enough expectations for their children (Thompson, 2016).
- Black students are unfortunately modeling the maladaptive influence of Black hip hop artists and gangsta rappers (Cooper-Haber & Sanchez, 2013), and
- Talking about racism just stirs up past societal ills, misplaced anger and guilt, so it should be avoided (Smith, Geroski, & Tyler, 2014).

Those lacking in CC - irreproachable Black and White children, well-intended Black and White parents, beneficent Black and White counselors - have internalize these narratives.

Without CC, SBFCs are likely to work with Colin and his parents by strictly engaging in microsystemic interventions that are suggested by the traditional SBFC counseling literature (see Figure 3). Regarding family work specifically, the SBFC literature suggests addressing parenting practices, family problem solving skills, creating a home environment conducive to learning, parent and school relationship building, and better social skills for Colin (Cooper-Haber & Sanchez, 2013; Families4Change, 2016; Smith, et al., 2004; Smith, Geroski, & Tyler, 2014). When it comes to working with the school, the SBFC literature suggests the microsystemic tasks of increasing teacher awareness of risk factors, understanding different types of aggression, and improving classroom management skills by reducing power-struggles (The Multisite Violence Prevention Project, 2014; Orpinas, Horne, & Project, 2004). While the interventions cited above are certainly valuable, if not integral to helping Colin and his parents, they all fail to address the apparatus that is pumping out structural racism into Colin's lived experience. Moreover, strict adherence to microsystemic work that ignores larger systemic influences, while well-intentioned, (a) invalidates Colin's experience as a boy of color in a predominantly white institution (PDWI); (b) implicitly blames Colin and his family by conceptualizing the problem as situated within the family system; and (c) maintains the inequitable status quo.

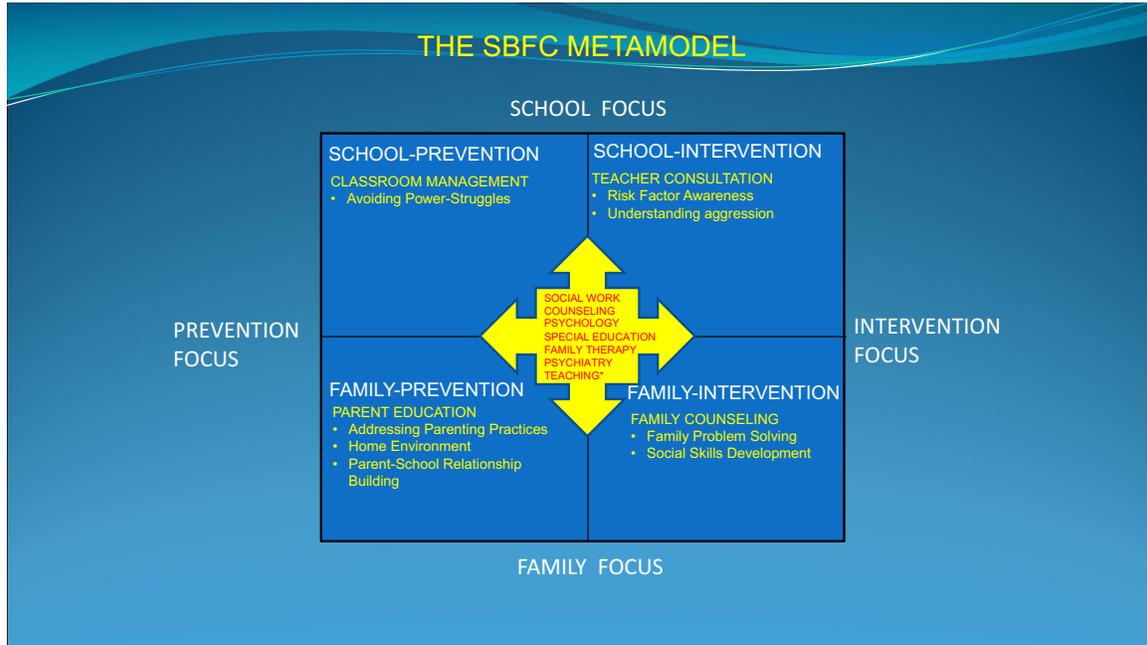


Figure 3 Traditional work within the SBFC meta-model

A critically conscious SBFC, however, would have the tools to see that the factors that inform Colin’s behavior in school are greater in their ecological complexity than what can be conceptualized as family problem solving skills, better social skills, and varying forms of aggression. Now, we will briefly examine what a critically conscious SBFC might see within the shared community resources that flow into Colin’s life, and how work within the exosystemic and macrosystemic levels will more effectively dismantle the pump and thereby do much more to meet the needs of not just Colin and his family, but countless other students and families in the school as well.

Implicit bias. Employing the tool of CC, a SBFC will look for macrosystemic maladies - dominant discourses - that may be informing Colin’s presenting issue. One particularly virulent strain of the discourse of white supremacy is implicit racial bias. Anti-Black implicit bias amongst well-meaning and well-intended counselors and teachers has been rigorously documented (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic 2016; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Shin, Smith, Welch, & Ezeofor, 2016). A recent study by Gilliam et al. (2016) used sophisticated eye-tracking technology to find that when preschool teachers are asked to scan a room of children and look for misbehavior, they spend more time looking at Black children, black boys more specifically. In other words, teachers assume that Black children are more problematic than white children. For many of us who are well-intended, beneficent persons, implicit bias has been macrosystemically downloaded into our phenomenological software without our knowledge or permission. In this case vignette, some of the work for the SBFC would entail providing workshops and professional development for the school faculty and staff regarding implicit bias and its effects upon students of color in their schools. Furthermore, in order to effectively address and interrupt implicit bias amongst Colin’s

teachers and administrators, a critically conscious SBFC would also need to have knowledge and understanding of the macrosystemic forces of colorblind racism and the good/bad racism binary (Kitching, 2011).

Good/bad racism binary. The good/bad racism binary is a discourse that is highly effective at shutting down conversations about implicit bias, much like dominant discourses on the vulgarity of personal hygiene shut down conversations about cholera in 19th England. The good/bad binary discourse positions all people in an either/or polarity regarding racism: you are either good (“not a racist bone in my body”), educated, nice and polite; or you are bad (“confederate flag flying”), uneducated, mean-spirited, and crude. By positioning racism within this either/or duality, the macrosystemic discourse of white supremacy successfully shuts down conversations and reflection on the pervasive production of racial stereotypes, colorblind racism, internalized racism amongst people of color, and the idea that undoing one’s implicit bias is a lifelong journey. In order to promote the dismantling of implicit bias amongst Colin’s teachers and staff, a SBFC would likely encounter stiff resistance stemming from the good/bad racism binary, and would need CC in order to see such resistance, understand, and address it.

Colorblind racism. Colorblind racism refers to the macrosystemic assumption that Colin’s race, or any other student’s racial identity for that matter, is invisible or irrelevant and that ethnic and racial differences amongst students and families should best be ignored or minimized for the good of the community (Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006; Manning, 2009; Sue, 2010). Teachers and administrators in Colin’s school who have internalized colorblind racism would suggest that their decision to avoid to issues of race is helpful, fair-minded and even multiculturally sensitive to Colin and other students of color. Colorblindness can be summed up by statements from well-meaning educators such as: “There’s only one race in this school, the human race” or “To me, the color of my student’s skin is like the color of my student’s eyes - it’s just not that significant.” Sue (2010) suggests that colorblindness may be tied to the good/bad racism binary: that is to say that being blind to racial differences equates to being unbiased, which buttresses one’s internal working model of “I’m a good person.” Rather than promoting equity, social justice scholars point out that colorblind racism reinforces the marginalization of persons of color by minimizing or denying their personal and institutional experiences of discrimination, and further reinforces the denial of implicit bias and structural racism (Choi, 2008; Desai, 2010; Gordon, 2005; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). In order to effectively address implicit bias, a critically conscious SBFC working with Colin and his family, would need to have the skills necessary to address and destabilize colorblind racism within the school.

Microaggressions. Another pathogenic strain within the discourse of white supremacy is that of racial microaggressions. A critically conscious SBFC would also possess the tools to analyze the school environment for inter-personal and structural microaggressions - those everyday indignities and demeaning messages conveyed by members of dominant groups towards members of non-dominant groups. For example, students of color often experience the microaggression entitled “the ascription of intelligence”—messages that assign a degree of intelligence to a student of color based on their race (Sue, 2010). The well-intended comment “You are so articulate” made by white teachers to kids of color conveys the hidden message that “Black kids are usually inarticulate” or the statement “Your writing is excellent and a credit to your family” communicates the assumption that students of color are generally not as intelligent as whites. Other microaggressions that are

common experiences for children of color in schools are assumptions of superior athletic ability, inadequate interpersonal skills, and criminal status (Boysen, 2012; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). For Colin, the experiences of his peers on the playground assuming that he's good at basketball, his friends jokingly referring to him as their "thug" buddy, and the older lady on the sidewalk clutching her hand bag a little tighter when he walks by, all consistently communicate to him that he is "the Other" (Chavous, 2002; Gossett, 1996; McCoy, 2011; Watkins, LaBarrie & Appio, 2010).

Literature is emerging on the deleterious effects of microaggressions on the psycho/social well-being of persons from traditionally marginalized groups. Racial microaggressions specifically have been correlated with depressive symptoms and negative affect (Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014). Perceived discrimination has also been shown to bear a relationship with psychological stress, state and trait anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Hwang & Ting, 2008). While the exact details of Colin's fight would need to be explored, an explanatory factor for Colin's disruptive behavior in school might very well be the incessant experience of the microaggressions within his social world. In working with Colin and his parents, a critically conscious SBFC would initiate the work with an assessment of Colin's experiences of racial microaggressions. Individual work may then center on building resiliency and skills for Colin to respond more adaptively to microaggressions; family work would entail educating Colin's moms on racial microaggressions and how they can empower him with the tools to respond more constructively, and school-based work would manifest in conducting in-services at the school on microaggressions and their impact on the social/emotional health of people of color along with advocating with the school board to integrate microaggression training into the school district curriculum. Work related to Colin's social or anger management skills would be ancillary, and carefully done in a manner that does not indirectly blame Colin for natural responses to racism.

Exosystemic inequalities. Beyond understanding how macrosystemic discourses influence Colin's microsystemic school environment, a critically conscious SBFC would also see how exosystemic pathogens impede Colin's development and wellbeing, and work within that ecological level as well. One exosystemic structure that has a tremendous impact on Colin's learning, emotional and behavioral environment is that of the retributive justice structures both within schools and the criminal justice system. The discourse of white supremacy has had an egregious macrosystemic influence on how schools engage in discipline, and upon the criminal justice system as well. The result has been in policies and practices that have historically targeted people of color (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Gotham, 2000). Hyper-representative contact with the discipline system by students of color contributes to higher rates of academic failure, dropout, and the school-to-prison pipeline for these populations. Carmichael and colleagues (2011) found that a single suspension or expulsion increases the likelihood of repeating a grade, which is the most significant predictor of dropping out of school. Other studies have found that students who experienced a suspension were 68% more likely to drop out of school, compared with youth who never experienced a school suspension (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Furthermore, African Americans are more likely than their White peers to receive exclusionary discipline (e.g. expulsion or suspension) for the same or similar disruptive behavior, suggested an entrenched racial bias in the school discipline system (Skiba, et al., 2011).

To address both discipline inequities in school systems and racial inequities within the criminal justice system, a critically conscious SBFC working with Colin would advocate for Restorative Practices (RP) to be implemented within the school system and the local criminal justice system. An explication of RP is beyond the scope of this article (see Thorsborne & Blood, 2013); however, it is important to note that RP is an ancient, indigenous approach to justice that views wrongdoing as a violation of people and relationships rather than a breaching of laws and rules. Emergent, though under-developed literature, suggests that implementation of RP within criminal justice institutions and schools may have the “remove the pump handle” potential to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and reduce suspension disparities in schools (Anafar, Evans, & Lester, 2013; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2014). If, as suggested by the literature, the discipline system at Colin’s school is the pump that delivers the pathogen of implicit bias into the community, then a critically conscious SBFC would advocate within the exosystemic structures of the school board and the state legislature to implement RP in criminal justice institutions and schools statewide.

Conclusion

By integrating CC into SBFC best practice, counselors will be able to see harmful macrosystemic pathogens, extend their reach beyond the microsystem, and work within the exosystemic level to remove the handles from the pumps that inject harmful social forces into the lived experiences of students and families from traditionally under-represented and marginalized groups. As demonstrated by the case study, the current microsystemic-centered approach within the SBFC literature is under-developed with regards to meeting the needs of students and families from traditionally under-represented groups. For this reason, the author calls for an expansion of the SBFC meta-model to include and address the exosystemic and macrosystemic levels (See Figure 4). Moreover, as SBFCs develop CC, they will necessarily be compelled to address the exosystemic and macrosystemic levels in their work, and an ecological expansion of the SBFC meta-model will likely happen organically.

In order to promote CC amongst future SBFCs, counselor educators and other related mental health academics will need to emphasize social justice pedagogy within their training programs. They will also need an instrument to reliably assess CC development. Thomas and colleagues (2014) developed a 9-item scale called the Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI). Additionally, the author and colleagues have recently developed the Contemporary Critical Consciousness Measure (CCCM: Shin, Ezeofor, Smith, Welch, & Goodrich, 2016). Our CCCM is an 18-item scale that assesses respondents’ awareness and attitudes related to the systemic, institutionalized forms of discrimination associated with racism, classism, and heterosexism.

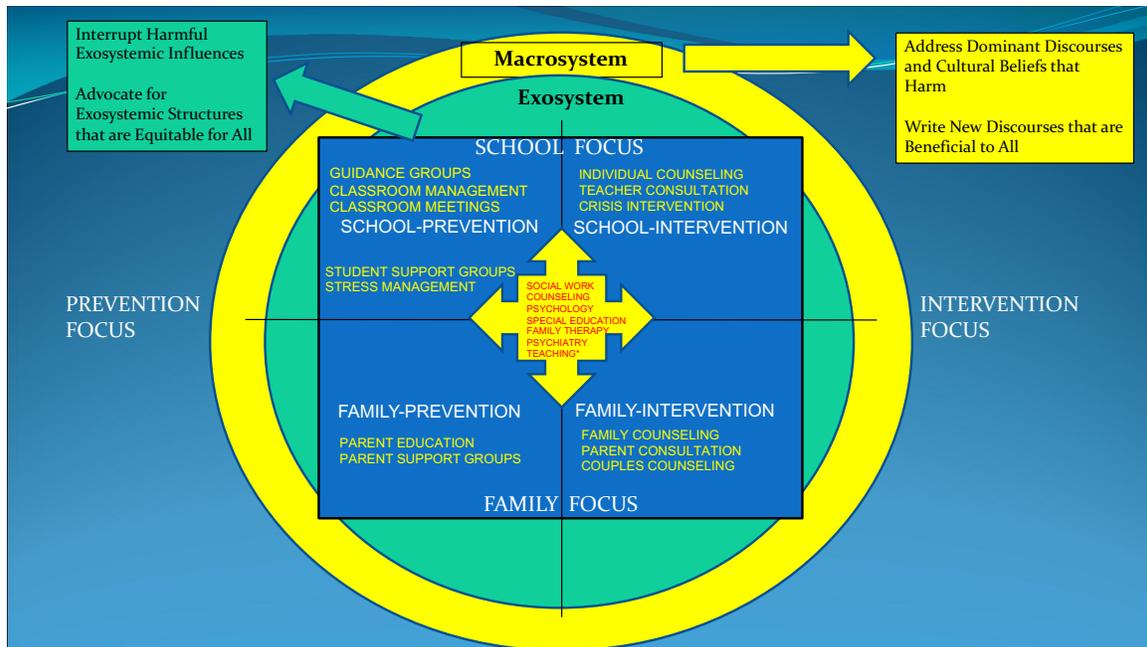


Figure 4 An expanded ecological SBFC meta-model

We believe that there are a wide range of training, research, and counseling implications associated with the CCCM. As a training tool, a brief measure assessing CC will have many benefits. The development of CC would allow SBFCs to better identify their personal biases and assumptions (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). The CCCM may also be a useful pre/post measure to assess the critical consciousness development of SBFCs in training after taking part in advocacy at the exosystemic and macrosystemic levels. Finally, the CCCM could be used as an outcome measure to help evaluate the effectiveness of multicultural training and prevention efforts at all ecological levels - microsystemic, exosystemic and macrosystemic.

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