Abstract
Scholars within critical qualitative inquiry and health sciences are becoming increasingly interested in transformative scholarship as a means to pursue greater justice in society. However, transformative scholarship has been taken up within frameworks that given a lack of consistent alignment with the critical paradigm seem to fall short in this intention. This article aims to reclaim transformative scholarship as an epistemological and methodological space that transforms and challenges the social order, situating social justice at the forefront of inquiry. The article begins by addressing the call for work toward social justice within critical qualitative inquiry. Subsequently, Creswell and Mertens’ frameworks are analyzed as examples of transformative scholarship that has distanced itself from its critical roots. Based on this analysis, we raise three problematics to illustrate the dangers of this distancing. We conclude by proposing to reframe transformative scholarship within the critical paradigm to (re)connect it to political stances and values.

Keywords
critical qualitative inquiry, critical social paradigm, transformative scholarship, Creswell, Mertens

What is already known?
Increasing calls from scholars for reorienting inquiry to focus on addressing social inequities have emerged within critical qualitative inquiry and health sciences. In response, transformative scholarship has been taken up within contemporary frameworks to express a commitment to social justice. A critical analysis of guiding frameworks for transformative scholarship is essential in order to move away from approaches characterized by implicit or explicit positivist/postpositivist assumptions that often fail to question and thereby transform the status quo.

What this paper adds?
This article analyzes an epistemological tension inherent in the frameworks proposed by Creswell and Mertens. By unpacking this epistemological tension, we aim to heighten awareness of potential dangers associated with a reliance on positivist/postpositivist assumptions in frameworks aiming to make a difference in people’s lives by promoting social transformation toward justice. It also contributes to scholarly movements within the fields of qualitative inquiry and health sciences that attempt to push away from the historical boundaries of positivism/postpositivism in order to engage with critical-informed and participatory forms of inquiry that can develop contextually situated understandings of injustices.

Introduction
The idea of this article came about in response to a current tension within the disciplinary home of the first three authors, specifically occupational science. This tension is arising as scholars increasingly attempt to take up the discipline’s moral and ethical commitment to social justice while at the same time being located within health sciences (Frank, 2012; Whiteford & Hocking, 2012)—a field largely grounded in positivist/postpositivist conceptualizations of the scientific method (Gibson, 2016). Thus, in an attempt to move beyond the historical
predominance of individualistic and positivist/postpositivist frames, this article responds to the increasing desire for taking up occupational science’s early calls to attend to the transformative potential of occupation to address social inequities (Townsend, 1997; Watson & Swartz, 2004). By aiming to understand and address this tension, we explore literature addressing other health disciplines’ similar expressions of struggle. From this standpoint, the intent of this article is to build on the efforts of occupational science and other disciplines such as nursing (Peter, 2011; Reimer-Kirkham & Browne, 2006), the disciplinary home of the fourth author, to mobilize social transformative efforts capable of capturing the systemic and complex root causes of social and health inequities.

For this purpose, we turn to the broader context of critical qualitative inquiry, a multidisciplinary movement that similar to occupational science is attempting to take up methodological approaches to draw attention to issues of power and positionality in order to increase possibilities for social justice (Cannella, Pérez, & Pasque, 2015). The expansion of critical qualitative inquiry over the past two decades has been stimulated by several sociopolitical and economic factors, such as the global rise in neoliberalism; a political economic theory that promotes postpositivist assumptions of “objective” science and values, such as self-sufficiency, autonomy, and individualism, shifting the responsibility for well-being and prosperity onto individuals away from the community or government (Gibson, 2016; Ilcac, 2009; Njelesani, Gibson, Nixon, Cameron, & Polatajko, 2013). In response, many scholars have reoriented inquiry to move beyond the individual experiences of those marginalized/excluded and to focus on the sociopolitical conditions that shape their possibilities for changing oppressive structures (Cannella et al., 2015; Denzin & Giardina, 2009; Hsiung, 2016; Meyer & Paraíso, 2012). As such, the term transformation has been used within critical qualitative inquiry in relation to the constraining impact of neoliberalism on collective opportunities for responding to issues of injustice and exposing the power relations and conditions that contribute to maintaining disparities (Kirkham & Browne, 2006).

This increasing integration of critical perspectives to address social injustices reflects scholars’ need to (re)engage with the foundations of qualitative inquiry as a reformist movement that started in the early 1970s in academia, involving diverse paradigmatic formulations and ethical criticism of traditional/positivist science (Schwandt, 2000). Although somewhat existing at the margins, critical qualitative inquiry has created a multidisciplinary space focused on how qualitative inquiry can be used for transformative intents which emphasizes the necessity of engagement with critical social theory (Cannella et al., 2015; Johnson & Parry, 2015). As such, transformative scholarship underpinned by a critical stance embraces assumptions of inquiry that are far from being value free or universally true, requiring researchers to take an explicit political or moral stance while interrogating their positionality in relation to the phenomenon under study (Fine, Weis, Wesson, & Wong, 2003; Lather, 2004). For instance, the term transformative is often associated with scholarship addressing the hidden structures of power that maintain unequal power relations in society that simultaneously create privilege and disadvantage (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Thus, at its core, transformative scholarship embodies a commitment to revealing unequal relations or conditions that cause injustices and altering such relations or conditions by promoting new viewpoints and possibilities for resistance and justice (Cannella et al., 2015; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

Broadly, the interest for employing critical perspectives in qualitative research for transformative purposes has been articulated by various scholars, such as Denzin, Lincoln, Giardina, Tuhíwai Smith, and Hsiung, among others, in recent years (see Cannella et al., 2015; Denzin & Giardina, 2009; Hsiung, 2016; Johnson & Parry, 2015; Meyer & Paraíso, 2012). Yet, as Cannella and Lincoln (2009) point out, the utilization of critical perspectives to orient research does not ensure social transformation. For example, perhaps the most common problem seen in the health sciences is that there is a partial adoption of critical lenses, particularly in terms of an espoused critical intent to readdress injustices, with a persistent reliance upon dominant positivist/postpositivist assumptions that promote singular truths and predetermined ways of thinking that do not question the status quo (Farias, Laliberte Rudman, & Magalhães, 2016). As articulated by Cannella and Lincoln (2009), “Although many contemporary researchers claim to use critical qualitative research methods (and we are among those), these inquiry practices often do not transform, or even appear to challenge, the dominant mainstream constructions” (p. 53).

Thus, to ensure that critical qualitative work maintains consistency with its critical roots and social transformation purposes, scholars continue to push away from the boundaries of positivism/postpositivism in order to develop contextual understandings of the sociopolitical roots of injustices (Johnson & Parry, 2015).

Drawing on the work of scholars who make the distinction between research paradigms such as positivist/postpositivism and critical (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), we view paradigms as dynamic commitments to philosophical assumptions and values that permeate and connect all dimensions of inquiry. As such, conscious or unconscious of these connections, a researcher’s approach to inquiry is inextricably linked to philosophical assumptions, perpetuating dominant research paradigms or seeking to disrupt them (Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, & Gildersleeve, 2012). Thus, a disconnection or unrecognized of researchers’ standpoints often manifests as dangers to social transformation and justice, especially when such an unconscious paradigm is built from contradictory philosophical assumptions (Pasque et al., 2012). In the next section, we turn to two scholars who have offered up contemporary frameworks for transformative scholarship to illustrate the limits of engagement with social transformation stemming from epistemological tensions. Building on concerns regarding critical qualitative inquiry raised by scholars such as Cannella and Lincoln (2009), we argue that the epistemological foundations and values that
guide transformative scholarship are integral to addressing social, health, and other forms of inequities. We also argue for combining critical and participatory traditions, and other forms of critical qualitative research, as means to more fully embrace the intent of transformative scholarship, particularly in relation to the need for countering the individualizing tendencies of neoliberalism.

Deconstruction Frameworks for Transformative Scholarship

In this section, we focus on two contemporary examples that self-identify as transformative. One is a social justice/transformational design launched by Creswell (2015) and the other is a transformative paradigm described by Mertens (2009). Our intent is not to articulate the details of each of these frameworks, but rather this deconstruction focuses on an epistemological tension between their stated intentions and the ways in which they frame transformative scholarship. It also demonstrates how this tension ultimately means that these frameworks do not align with critical qualitative inquiry.

According to Mertens, the emergence of a transformative paradigm has been partly stimulated by an increasing awareness of the need for other paradigmatic options in research evaluation and education psychology, fields largely dominated by positivist/postpositivist thinking (Mertens, 2009). This increasing awareness has pushed scholars as herself “to provide a different avenue of approach to solving intransigent problems” such as discrimination, marginalization, and oppression (Mertens, 2009, p. 3). Accordingly, to “solve” ongoing global inequities, Mertens’ transformative paradigm emerged as an overarching metaphysical framework that can support marginalized groups through research and evaluation that attempts to use results to enhance social justice (Mertens, 2009). Similarly, Creswell launched a social justice mixed methods design (also called transformative, emancipatory) as an alternative approach for studies that focus on “improving the lives of individuals in our society today” (2015, p. 7) and seek to call for specific changes by “taking a theoretical stance in favor of underrepresented or marginalized groups” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 49).

Our aim in this section is to go beyond the stated critical intent of these transformative frameworks to remediate social issues and ally with those experiencing marginalization and to examine Creswell and Mertens’ work as examples of contemporary attempts to frame and prescribe how to do transformative scholarship. This critical analysis focuses on three problematics that we connect to the failure to embrace and enact a critical epistemological and axiological frame. First, we raise concerns regarding how these frameworks appear to take up a key aspect of positivist/postpositivist epistemology by naturalizing reality or accepting how an issue has come to be dominantly framed as essentially true. Second, we articulate the dangers inherent in promoting an individualistic perspective in interpretations of injustices. Third, we describe the risks of disconnecting researchers’ moral values and political stance from their work.

The Problem of Naturalizing Reality and Adopting an Objectivist Stance

The analysis of Creswell and Mertens’ frameworks allows us to observe how social transformation efforts can be carried along with common positivist/postpositivist tendencies that risk neglecting complex processes and structures that accept or maintain oppressive practices. One of these tendencies relates to the naturalization of reality, as it presents itself as “true” or “false,” which is characteristic of positivist/postpositivist epistemological assumptions that conceive reality as “given” (Chamberlain, 2000; Eakin, 2016). This location tends to promote notions of objective reality, that is, reality as preexisting or already there, static and detached from its social construction and the researcher, and therefore possible to control and measure by the researcher (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). For example, this positivist/postpositivist tendency is reflected in how “the problem” is examined. More specifically, Creswell’s design seems to study predetermined problems given to the researcher/evaluator without questioning “who/what is helped/privileged/legitimized and who/what is harmed/opposed/disqualified” by framing a problem in a particular way (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009, p. 54). Such lack of questioning of the problem, as it is given or predefined, positions the phenomenon under study as being independent of the observer, which in turn limits researchers’ abilities to draw on critical lenses to question how the problem has come to be constructed and by whom and how it might otherwise be seen.

This positivist/postpositivist tendency can also be seen in the way qualitative inquiry is positioned within Creswell and Mertens’ frameworks for transformative scholarship. In both cases, qualitative research is outlined as a “toolbox” or “cafeteria,” where scholars can pick and choose methods separated from their philosophical stances (Eakin, 2016; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012; Pasque & Pérez, 2015). As such, this framing influences how qualitative data are collected and analyzed, that is, through an objectivist lens that naturalizes and reduces reality to “what is seen” using specific technical means, which in turn can be unproblematically combined with what works (Chamberlain, 2000; Eakin, 2016). As result of this disconnection of inquiry from philosophy and theory, qualitative research becomes positioned in a service role that can “humanize statistics, enhance buy-in from researcher subjects or end-users, and explain conflicting or unexpected results” (Eakin, 2016, p.116) and critical qualitative inquiry is not achieved.

Furthermore, such objectification of reality can be inferred from Mertens’ framework which promotes descriptive approaches that capture “snapshots” in time that can be used to assess community needs (see Mertens, 2009, chap. 5). This naturalization of reality as static and as waiting to be captured tends to promote description as the primary objective of research at the expense of interpretation or deconstruction, that is, thinking about (i.e., interpreting, conceptualizing) the
Creswell’s frameworks can inadvertently (re)produce within context in complex ways may means that Mertens and practices, and discourses that generate privilege and disadvantage, runs the risk of obscuring the wider structures, understandings of injustices, which aligns with a positivism/postpositivism of reality rather than enabling critical, in-depth people’s views seem to focus on obtaining a more accurate description of reality rather than enabling critical, in-depth understandings of injustices, which aligns with a positivism/postpositivism preference for generating a valid report.

This tendency to focus on achieving a valid reading of reality, that is, decontextualized from sociohistorical factors and power relations, runs the risk of obscuring the wider structures, practices, and discourses that generate privilege and disadvantage (Bolam et al., 2004). This failure to place individuals within context in complex ways may means that Mertens and Creswell’s frameworks can inadvertently (re)produce injustices by reducing them to individual and private experiences. The resulting individualization can perpetuate injustices by placing blame, shame, and responsibility on the individual (Bhaskar, 1989/2011; Wright, 2010). Since the complex socio-economic and historical roots of structural inequities are neglected, the promotion of individualization within social transformative frameworks runs the risk of (re)orienting transformative efforts toward fixing the individual instead of addressing the social structural issues that shape peoples’ lives (Farias et al., 2016). At the same time, individualistic interpretations of injustices seem contradictory to the term “social” in social transformation from which it is possible to infer a social or collective orientation which implies that human emancipation depends on the transformation of the social world and not just on the individual inner self (Bhaskar, 1989/2011; Wright, 2010).

What is more, this tendency toward individualization is promoted within contemporary contexts influenced by neoliberalism that privilege values such as self-sufficiency and autonomy (Gibson, 2016; Ilcan, 2009). This tendency is often operationalized by discourses that conceptualize issues of injustice as a matter of individual choice/responsibility and/or self-determination (Bolam et al., 2004, p. 1359). As such, research that fails to question individualization risks obscuring the inequities produced through neoliberal informed discourses and the practices they shape.

From a critical standpoint, the focus on validly capturing an objective reality is problematized based on the assumption that reality is contextually situated and complex and therefore cannot be captured as a single and static form. A fundamental assumption that underlies critical qualitative inquiry is its opposition to the separation of individuals from contexts (Wilson-Thomas, 1995). On these grounds, social transformative efforts that attempt to achieve an objective and neutral representation of reality are seen as insufficient when dealing with social matters that demand taking into account the wider social macro-processes (i.e., historical, socioeconomic, and structural factors) that open up and limit people’s access to and possibilities for participating in society (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Laliberte Rudman, 2014). For example, issues of oppression have a strong interrelation with the history of the land or territory in which individuals reside such that many groups experience oppression due to a history of colonization within their land which perpetuates the status of those in power (Arredondo, 2008). Hence, while Mertens and Creswell’s frameworks attempt to support the transformative efforts of individuals and groups that experience systematic disadvantages, their epistemological location risks reducing social matters to individualized and decontextualized experiences.

The Problem of Individualization

A second tendency that seems to underlie Mertens and Creswell’s frameworks relates to the process of individualization where “individuals are disembedded from existing social relations and traditional sources of social identity, such as social class” (Bolam, Murphy, & Gleeson, 2004, p.1356). Although the transformative paradigm and social justice design promote engagement with communities to enhance researchers’ cultural sensitivity and competence, these attempts seem to be used as a means to achieve higher validity (see Mertens, 2009, chap. 3). As such, Mertens and Creswell’s efforts for considering people’s views seem to focus on obtaining a more accurate description of reality rather than enabling critical, in-depth understandings of injustices, which aligns with a positivism/postpositivism preference for generating a valid report.

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The Problem of Disconnecting Researchers’ Values

A third tendency that is possible to infer as underlying Mertens and Creswell’s framework is the emphasis on disconnecting researchers’ moral values and political stance from their projects. Allied with the objectivist epistemology of positivism/
postpositivism, this axiological position assumes that researchers can study a phenomenon without influencing or being influenced by it (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). In other words, who the researcher is—that is, his or her disciplinary position, social characteristics, and political stance—does not and should not matter for the process or outcomes of research.

For instance, Creswell’s social justice design encourages researchers to select the “best” worldview (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), such as Mertens’ socially transformative paradigm, for their attempts to improve social justice, thereby implying that a worldview can be chosen for pragmatic reasons as something separate from the researcher. Although Mertens proposes integrating a process of self-reflection into research, there is little or no acknowledgement of researcher’s values and political stance regarding social justice in the description of Creswell and Mertens’ frameworks. In fact, the emphasis on including a social justice lens throughout the study to ensure its social justice nature (e.g., including groups experiencing marginalization) seems to serve as a catch-all umbrella to deal with the issue of values in research.

Within critical forms of qualitative inquiry, it has increasingly been recognized that researchers consciously and/or unconsciously bring assumptions and perspectives to their research (Bochner, 2000). Within transformative work, such assumptions and perspectives need to be continuously interrogated given that they may at times be at odds with the social justice goals and lens selected for a specific study. For example, researchers’ belief systems regarding what is right/healthy/good/just can vary substantially across the globe, which can become problematic when conducting social justice/transformational research that attempts to be objective and value-free. Researchers may fail to perceive different stances and misunderstand silences, producing what Santos (2014) calls a “sociology of absence” (p. 164) which is structured through the researcher’s values (e.g., including groups experiencing marginalization) seems to serve as a catch-all umbrella to deal with the issue of values in research.

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transformative scholarship from frameworks that seem to be aligned with positivist/postpositivist assumptions. In particular, we understand critical theory as a paradigm that encompasses a range of diverse theories (e.g., feminist, poststructural, decolonizing, Marxist, queer theory) and positionalities connected through key shared aspects (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Some scholars (Lincoln et al., 2011) consider all participatory approaches as being part of a distinct paradigm (i.e., participatory), but we are working with participatory perspectives as part of the critical paradigm.

Although we have highlighted that a key aspect of work embedded within the critical paradigm includes “its commitment to questioning the hidden assumptions and purposes of competing theories and existing forms of practice and responding to situations of oppression and injustice by giving rise to new possibilities” (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016, p. 3), work embedded within this umbrella has been criticized for failing to translate its motivation to actions that enhance social justice (Denzin & Giardina, 2009; Sayer, 2009). Thus, in this section, we provide a brief overview of the limitations and strengths of the participatory and critical traditions when used separately drawing on literature from critical social science, international development, and community-based practice. By introducing these limitations and strengths, we advocate, aligned with advancements in critical participatory action research (e.g., Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012; Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012), for creatively combining critical and participatory traditions and other forms of critical qualitative research as ways to move transformative scholarship into more critically informed, action-oriented, and social justice directions.

**An Overview of Participatory and Critical Traditions**

**Participatory.** The roots of participatory research can be traced to northern and southern traditions (Wallstein & Duran, 2008). In the global north, the need for participatory inquiry was prompted by events in the 1950s and 1960s related to the civil rights and antiwar student movements in the United States. As such, this northern tradition can also be linked to Lewin’s work on action research and experiential learning (1951), Fals-Borda’s participatory action research (1979), and Skolimowski’s participatory mind (1994). On the other hand, the southern tradition of participatory ways of creating knowledge can be traced to the emergence of pressing social and economic issues in the global south such as the military dictatorships that emerged between 1973 and 1989 in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. This tradition developed in the south is rooted in Freire’s work on adult literacy for cultural education (1988), Marxist critics, liberation theology, and a recognition of the colonizing role of research and education within marginalized communities. While it is beyond the scope of this article to expand on each stream, we recognize their influence on participatory research and how this tradition is continuously evolving and changing into diverse research forms such as Black participatory action research and critical participatory action research from the Public Science Project (Lykes, 2001; Stoudt et al., 2012; Torre, & Ayala, 2009; Torre et al., 2012).

In this section, we draw particular attention to Heron and Reason’s articulation of participatory because of its great influence on what today is known as participatory inquiry. Heron and Reason formalized these ideas in 1997, coining the term “participatory” as the ground for inquiry that involves people’s experiential knowledge. In particular, Heron and Reason’s vision for a participatory approach started developing during their work on cooperative inquiry, a model designed by Heron in 1968–1969 to emphasize a reciprocal relation between people involved in a study. Their vision focused on the process of two or more individuals researching a topic together using a series of cycles in which people explore the world “from within,” moving between their experiential knowledge and the process of reflecting together on it (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997). Thus, in terms of strengths, Heron and Reason’s participatory framework introduces the possibility of doing research with people, instead of about them. It also presents self-reflection as part of the research process in order for the participants to reach self-awareness as a way to reach human flourishing (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997).

Heron and Reason’s participatory vision and contemporary participatory research forms have been widely promoted and discussed from the mid-1980s onward (Neef, 2003).

However, after a boom period throughout the 1990s, in recent years, increasing criticism of how participatory inquiry, specifically participatory action research (PAR), has been taken up has materialized (e.g., Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2006). For instance, similar to concerns raised in our critique of Mertens and Creswell’s frameworks, one forefronted concern is for the use of PAR as a toolbox disconnected from philosophy and theory. This issue has been related to its increasing reduction to the diagnostic stage of problems and priorities, which in turn has perpetuated an instrumental character and a myth of instant analysis of local knowledge (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). For instance, Cleaver (1999) argues that this instrumentalization of PAR and focus on “getting the techniques right” to ensure the success of such projects, risks the disengagement of participation from its original political motivation (p. 36).

Another issue present in the literature is that most participatory research forms pay insufficient attention to the heterogeneity within the groups with whom they work (e.g., gender, age, and social position) and to conflicting interests among them (Lavigne Delville, Sellamna, & Mathieu, 2000). In line with this issue, participatory research forms have been criticized for becoming too focused on the local, failing to connect local issues to broader systems of power relations through which people are disempowered (Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Mohan & Stokke, 2000). Akin to our earlier forefronting of the problematic of individualization, this implies that wider issues related to social conditions (e.g., history of colonialism, institutionalism) that create and maintain marginalization and inequity often are left out in participatory projects. As
articulated by Cooke and Kothari (2001), “an emphasis on micro-level of intervention can obscure, and indeed sustain, broader macro-level inequalities and injustices” (p. 14).

Critical. Critical work encompasses multiple critical theories that are always evolving, creating a dynamic theoretical space (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). These multiple theories are held together ontologically by a view of reality based on power relations that are socially and historically mediated. This struggle for power leads to interactions of privilege and oppression that can be based on, for example, race or ethnicity, socioeconomics, class, gender, mental or physical abilities, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation. Thus, in terms of strengths, critical work facilitates the introduction of issues related to oppression and power to inquiry, and the examination of the root causes of these issues (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009).

Overall, critical work has been largely promoted because of its commitment to questioning and exposing oppressive structures which gives it a potential emancipatory character (Sayer, 1997). However, scholars have pointed out that although critical work is underpinned by an emancipatory motivation, its inconclusive nature can limit its intent to identify inequities and injustices without acting against them (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009; Sayer, 2009). As such, critical work has been criticized for overemphasizing the questioning of reality, risking turning its work into a sort of swamp of interminable criticism and deconstructions (Finlay, 2002; Sayer, 2009). Furthermore, Bhaskar (1986) and others have argued that since the main problem many times is not finding the cause of oppression but finding alternatives that are less problematic, questioning reality and enabling people to reveal the source of their suffering conditions are not sufficient for generating emancipation. Thus, for many scholars, claims regarding the potential of critical work for social transformation need to be moderated by recognizing that this work often is disconnected from generating feasible alternatives of action (Freire, 2006; ISSC, IDS, & UNESCO, 2016). This issue of applicability cuts to the heart of critical scholars who have been criticized for constructing a society so oppressive that the scope of possible actions tends to shrink into a vanishing point, leaving the issue of social transformation at an ideological rather than practical level (Stirk, 2005).

(Re)engaging transformative scholarship with the critical paradigm. Based on the criticism of the critical and participatory traditions presented earlier, scholars have started combining these traditions to provide a more fruitful space for advancing transformative scholarship and bringing back an explicit commitment to social justice and political engagement. As such, scholars are drawing on critical theorists such as Freire among others to integrate a critical analysis of structures of oppression within participatory forms of research to value knowledge that has been historically marginalized and challenge broader relations of power (e.g., Fine & Torre, 2004; Torre et al., 2012; Stoudt et al., 2012). This movement brings examples of critical PAR as one way to reinvigorate transformative scholarship rooted in notions of democracy and social justice by engaging with people’s experiences to generate a deeper understanding of how locally situated issues are shaped by broader processes without staying only at an ideological level. Other examples of this work are Fox and Fine (2015) who combine participatory action research and relational approaches to illustrate how the collective production of knowledge through research builds youth leadership capacity. Similarly, the first author of this article is exploring the potential of a critical dialogical approach as a space to enact critical reflexivity and social transformation (forthcoming).

As such, transformative scholarship provides a space for combining participatory processes in which community partners reflect on their diverse experiences of injustices, and critical examination of the broader social, economic, and political forces that shape these experiences. Further, transformative processes can combine critical examination of local issues in relation to broader social processes to not only point out “what is not right” but also express a commitment to people’s significant knowledge and capacities to (re)negotiate their position within power relations, and design actions that are suitable for their particular context (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Torre et al., 2012). Thus, creative combinations of critical and participatory traditions and other forms of critical qualitative research in conjunction with social transformative goals have the potential to enact research as a social process of gathering people’s knowledge to generate actions designed to challenge the status quo. From this combination, transformative scholarship could be (re)configured as an epistemological and methodological space that considers and addresses individual, collective, and local as well as institutional and structural dimensions.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined two models of transformative scholarship. We concluded that while a commitment toward social justice indicates a desire to promote change, relying on positivist/postpositivist assumptions often risks accepting problems as they are dominantly defined, perpetuating individualistic interpretations of injustices and neglecting the sociopolitical construction of injustices. As an alternative, we propose to reframe transformative scholarship within the critical paradigm by embracing epistemological values and methodologies that promote a more complex understanding of people’s experiences and the conditions that (re)produce injustices.

Although we acknowledge that enacting transformative scholarship is a difficult and complex challenge, particularly in contemporary sociopolitical contexts that often emphasize methodological “prescription” (Chamberlain, 2000), this article does not aim to suggest predefined ways to do transformative scholarship. Rather, we emphasize how important it is to “think about” how social justice goals could shape the ways research is conducted (e.g., partnerships, collaboration, knowledge generation, design of action (Cheek, 2008) and recognize
that the implications of transformative scholarship for research and practice entail diverse possibilities. From this perspective, researchers’ values, assumptions, and interpretations should become explicit in order to facilitate a deeper understanding and engagement with the value system being put forward in the context they are situated (Fine et al., 2003). Along these lines, it seems essential to (re)connect transformative scholarship to political stances, epistemological standpoints, and social justice goals by taking up inquiry in innovative ways to enact relevant and adaptable projects for specific social settings.

In line with this, embracing transformative scholarship can facilitate recognition of researchers’ moral responsibility and commitment to the very persons and communities with whom they engage. This potential for seeking to work with communities in democratic, inclusive, and respectful ways builds on the two traditions presented in this article, critical and participatory, and aligns with calls to work toward greater equity in society. Further, such a transformative stance may help those disciplines and researchers embracing a critical intent to seek support for people’s resistance, strengths, and rights to have a say in actions which affect them and claim to generate knowledge about them, thereby disputing conservative perspectives of representation and moving away from an “expert” position (Denzin & Giardina, 2009; Santos, 2014). Thus, considering the potential of transformative scholarship, we advocate for shifting away from dominant models of scientific, value-free, and positivist inquiry to promote creative ways of bringing together people’s aspirations, political or moral stances, and possibilities for transformation.

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