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Designing Research to Dismantle Oppression: Utilizing Critical Narrative Analysis & Critical Participatory Action Research in Research on Mothering and Work and Beyond

By Nicole Dillard¹

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) as valuable methodologies in research for their potential to challenge the inherent absoluteness of master narratives through the personal and counter-narratives of research participants, while also providing participants an action-oriented emancipatory opportunity to lead the change needed in their organizations, communities and society at large.

Citing a previous study which explored how patriarchal, colonially-structured master narratives have played a significant role in reproducing the limited views which dominate American understanding of working mothers, the author will demonstrate how CNA and CPAR combined can expose how these master narratives have been particularly damaging to working, mothers of color. Additionally, the CNA and CPAR approach allowed for the participating women of color to analyze their own personal experiences as well as provide a societal analysis that advocates for broader social change through the transformational action of the women themselves.

Finally, the author makes the case for the potential of a combined CNA and CPAR approach across other content areas beyond mothering and work. Thus, by creating research that is centered on the specific lived experiences of our participants, we can support the development of critical consciousness, the self-reflection of others while also creating meaningful change that can inform our communities, organizations and society. This approach also has the capacity to create space for diverse perspectives to be included in knowledge and meaning making, which has invaluable implications in scholarship, research, practice and policy.

Keywords: Critical Participatory Action Research, Critical Narrative Analysis, mothering, work, working mothers.

Introduction

The position I adopt in this work is aligned with Lyotard's (1979) assertion that the master narrative(s) guiding societal and organizational beliefs, values, and knowledge represents a very dominant and privileged standpoint. Using the master narratives of mothering and work in American culture as examples, this research illuminates the ability of Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) to center the power and wisdom in the experiences of mothers of color in research. Secondly, it is through this example of mothering and work, that I make the case for the potential of broader applicability of a combined Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) approach. Specifically, this approach can be applied beyond the mothering and work context, in any research

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that centers other lived experiences that, similar to women of color, do not fit into and are harmed by a dominant narrative's invisible and sustained hold on beliefs, values, norms, and expectations.

Background to the Article

This current work centers a discussion on previous dissertation work that focused on the experiences of working mothers of color as they navigated master narratives of mothering and work. The two research questions which were originally explored were: *How are narratives of mothering and work experienced by working mothers of color* and *how can the development of counter-narratives facilitate empowerment?* To provide context, the purpose of the original study was twofold. First, from a critical perspective, I explored and exposed the master narratives of mothering and work as a mechanism of oppression, in the ways that the narratives marginalize the experiences of women of color. Second, I explored the experiences of mothers of color as they navigate and challenge these narratives (Dillard, 2018). The critical emancipatory nature of this research engaged the participating mothers of color in a process of empowerment that allowed us to see how the master narrative shapes their experience and to develop tools of resistance to diminish the narrative's harmful effects.

Overview

In this current paper, I would like to make a case for utilizing a two-prong methodology of Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) as a valuable research approach for developing critical consciousness, increasing reflection, and creating change. CNA and CPAR are two distinct approaches to qualitative research, each present with critical, emancipatory and anti-colonizing intentions, which allows for a pronounced methodological alignment. Specifically, Maria Souto-Manning describes CNA as the "interplay of critical discourse and narrative analysis" (2014, p.1). Combining an analysis that provides both macro- and micro-analyses of the stories that define our lives is the goal of CNA. It does this through combining elements of both critical discourse analysis (CDA) and narrative inquiry. Once participants are able to reflect and develop a critical consciousness of the impact of these narratives on their lives, they can now engage in meaningful actions to create change. This latter process is facilitated through the emancipatory process of CPAR. CPAR allows for the engagement of CNA due to its focus on action research being a social practice itself. In order to provide empirical illustrations of the value of combining CNA and CPAR, various examples of research studies that utilized a CNA and CPAR methodology will be explored throughout this paper. Specifically, in the context of the original study, the mothers of color empowered themselves through the development of tools and practices that resisted the norms generated by the master narratives. This notion of a social practice encouraged an active engagement of the mothers with the dominant discourses. Guendouzi notes, "women both take up and resist cultural expectations or master narratives of motherhood" (2005, p.902). Therefore, as Kemmis (2007) describes, action research is a "practice changing practice" (p. 463). Through this social practice, the participants and their stories become centered in the research and their agency is reclaimed as they seek to promote greater self and social change.

Understanding Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR)

Maria Souto-Manning's conceptualization of CNA is based on Freire's (1979) notion of developing a critical meta-awareness to promote social change and action based on your own narratives. As suggested by Souto-Manning, "this meta-awareness allows participants to develop a relationship of appropriation (as opposed to colonization) with language (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) and thus applies critical analysis to identify, problematize, take a stand, and engage in social action to change oppressive situations" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 177). From this perspective, CNA demands an analysis that is double-looped. By member checking the data and bringing it back to the participants in a way that they can explore the meaning behind their texts in the interviews, they are able to identify how these narratives have shaped and have been shaped by their experiences. This identification is a powerful process in the further work to engage participants in challenging the inherent nature of master narratives while also problematizing those narratives through empowerment.

Thus, CNA is an analytical tool and an emancipatory process. Souto-Manning (2014) views discourses as potentially colonizing because they have the power to transform social relations. However, a discourse is only powerful when it is recycled in stories everyday people tell. Therefore, personal narrative is so vital for change agents. With the introduction of the power of personal (and counter-) narratives, this type of research can focus on and highlight how individuals can share their own stories and narratives to begin to make new meaning that challenge and resist dominant narratives. It is through the methods of CNA that individuals can make sense of their experiences through the narratives, which bring together the *micro* (personal) and the *macro* (social or institutional) situations in context.

Similar to CNA, CPAR also enhances the emancipatory component of research. CPAR "expresses a commitment to bring together broad social analyses, the self-reflective collective self-study of practice and transformational action to improve things" (Kemmis, et al., 2014, p. 27). CPAR has a long history of exposing the nature of disempowerment created in industrialized societies, and in recent times has incorporated an intersectional approach to understanding contemporary issues of injustice (Kemmis, et al. 2014; Torre, et al., 2011). In this regard, its intersectional nature makes it an appropriate approach for dismantling systems and structures that foster exclusion.

Bridging Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) and Critical Participation Action Research (CPAR)

CNA aims to take apart, question, and investigate the ideological foundations of discourses normalized over a period of time (Teo, 2000). It does this by employing both linguistic and social theories to investigate the interplay of ideologies and power in discourses. Therefore, CNA is helpful in understanding these discourses with the aim of generating social change and action. CNA can be a powerful extension of Critical Discourse Analysis by resolving the main criticism of CDA - that it is generally focused on the larger meta-narratives and their seemingly one directional impact on the lives of individuals. As Souto-Manning notes, "despite the intricacies and interrelationships between life-worlds and systems, discourse-analytic approaches still fail to simultaneously and systematically consider micro- and macro-linguistic realms" (2014, p. 162). So, while discourse analysis is apt in exploring the broader, societal, and institutional narratives

that impact our lives, critical narrative analysis weaves in the micro-level analysis of the personal, individualized stories and counter-narratives that we create.

This is a major determining factor in why I gravitate towards CNA in my own research. As a person of color, who centers my research on people of color, I find that much of the literature approaches our experiences solely from a deficit-approach. While I agree that it is important to highlight how certain communities are isolated, marginalized and erased; I also believe in the need to reify the power of our own experiences as generators of and assets to opportunity, wisdom, and meaning. CNA allows me to do both through the wedding of CDA with narrative analysis. CNA therefore becomes an approach to research and praxis that can accommodate both the power of the discursive social field and the moral impulse to take a stand (Souto-Manning 2007, 2010a). However, it is important to note that while the emerging nature of CNA has provided great opportunity for research to act as a tool to challenge hegemonic and oppressive forces behind these narratives, there is still room for improvement in CNA's ability to engage individuals in an emancipatory process of awareness and empowerment to establish their own counter-narratives. This is where the value of CPAR supplements CNA based on its emphasis of self-reflection, emancipation, and empowerment for change.

Atweh, Kemmis, and Weeks (1998) clarify the role of CPAR to develop a critical consciousness by emphasizing that the action component of CPAR works as an attempt to support individuals' self-investigation of their social realities by changing the circumstances that constitutes their lived experiences.

Current thinking for CPAR focuses on how to create (or recreate) new possibilities for what Orlando Fals Borda calls *vivencia* (humane forms of social life) through the revitalization of the public sphere, and to promote decolonialization of lifeworlds that have become saturated with bureaucratic discourses, routines, practices, and institutionalized forms of social relationships, the characteristic of social systems that see the world only through the prism of organization, not the human and humane living of social lives (Kemmis, et al., 2005, p. 571-572).

Central to our ability to create new possibilities and challenge existing discourses and narratives is the belief that knowledge is highly contextualized and should not be centered on one way of knowing. The ability for marginalized communities to provide a privileged knowledge and analyses from their own experiences and social contexts is clearly linked to a development of critical consciousness necessary to empower individuals for social change. Cammarota and Romero (2009) spoke to the role of CPAR in developing a critical consciousness, which allows individuals to identify "contexts that circumscribe their opportunities and possibilities for self-determination, produce greater social justice, and reclaim the political space that silences their voices by filling in the missing element, [their own] knowledge" (p.54). Therefore, the bridging of CNA with CPAR allows us to explore the ways in which narratives impact, develop, and sustain the norms and assumptions that we use to order our worlds. Martín-Baró, Aron, and Corne (1994) called these assumptions the collective lie, of prevailing ideological constructions of social problems. This bridging allows for new ways to understand our worlds through the lived experiences of marginalized groups who are not often included in the dominant conversations. In other words, the experience of seeing the reality of one's life in the mirror alongside others creates openings for new levels of analysis of one's experience, of connections to larger social-political frameworks, of transformative thought (Martín-Baró, et al., 1994). Combining CNA with CPAR

explores new ways to create counter-narratives and empower ourselves to create new meaning in our lives. “Interrupting the distorted social narratives or collective lie as Martín-Baró termed it, with aggregated data from everyday people not only eased what he referred to as the schizophrenia of living one experience while being told you are/should be having another, but also allowed people to re-understand their individual experiences through a collective lens” (Torre, 2012, p. 29).

Women of Color and Mothering & Work

Counterspaces and the Development of Critical Consciousness

While CNA focuses on individual narratives collected mainly through individual interviews, CPAR encourages the co-construction of knowledge and self-reflection through community (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Thus, one of the unique components of CPAR that facilitates this type of collaborate effort is its counterspace sessions. Similar to focus groups, counterspaces provide researchers with a collective level of data collection. However, a clear distinction from focus groups is the emancipatory and critical nature of counterspaces. Thus, counterspaces are collective spaces where participants engage with each other and collectively speak to issues of empowerment, oppression, justice, agency, change, and support (Olivos, 2007).

A counterspace was used in the original study as a method to develop a critical consciousness of the narratives of mothering and work, and the impact that these narratives have on the everyday experiences of mothers of color. Many of the participants felt isolated in their experiences and did not have a community to express some of their concerns. The counterspace provided a sense of solidarity, as they began to make connections with other working mothers who shared the same or similar experiences. This was particularly powerful for the mothers who had multiple, intersecting identities that were oppressed in the workplace (unwed Black mothers, immigrant mothers, mothers in male-dominated industries, etc.). The counterspace was guided by both CPAR principles and practice of the critical dialogue cycle as articulated by the Public Science Project (see Table 1). I chose these principles intentionally as they provided some loose guidance and direction for the participants, while also allowed space for a co-creation process. Ultimately, these sessions were intended to engage participants in developing their own counter-narratives designed to resist and decenter oppressive forces that impact their lives in safe and culturally centered spaces. The success of counterspaces centered by women and mothers of color has been well documented through the literature as a way to create activism for change, develop a critical friends network through collective solidarity, and foster an environment of trust (Dyrness, 2011; Fals-Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991; Villenas 2005, 2006a, 2006b). In fact, the process of group interviews has been instrumental in feminist research and CPAR for providing opportunities for women to center research on their experiences. Feminist and action researcher Esther Madriz notes:

Focus groups can be an important element in the advancement of an agenda of social justice for women because they can serve to expose and validate women's everyday experiences of subjugation and their individual and collective survival and resistance strategies...Group interviews are particularly suited for uncovering women's daily experience through collective stories and resistance narratives that are filled with cultural symbols, words, signs, and ideological representations that

reflect different dimensions of power and domination that frame women's quotidian experiences. (2000, p. 836)

This was a critical experience for the mothers in the original study. Many were not aware of the larger narratives, and through the CNA and CPAR process, they were able to clearly connect these narratives to specific experiences they were having at work, which contributed to their ability to develop strategies based on counter-narratives that helped to create change. For example, as the mothers shared their experiences with stress and burnout, they began to see how those experiences were shaped by the larger narratives of *intensive mothering and the ideal worker* (Dillard, 2018).

Table 1: Principles and commitments of CPAR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To value knowledges that have been historically marginalized and delegitimized (i.e., youth, prisoner, immigrant) alongside traditionally recognized knowledges (i.e., scholarly).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To share the various knowledges and resources held by individual members of the research collective so members can participate as equally as possible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To collaboratively decide appropriate research questions, design, methods, and analysis as well as useful research products.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To create a research space where individuals and the collective can express their multiplicity and use this multiplicity to inform research questions, design and analyses.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage creative risk-taking in the interest of generating new knowledge (i.e., understanding individuals and the collective to be “under construction” with ideas and opinions that are in formation, expected to grow, etc.).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To attend theoretically and practically to issues of power and vulnerability within the collective and created by the research. To strategically <i>work</i> the power within the group when necessary to benefit both individual and collective needs/agendas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To excavate and explore disagreements rather than smooth them over in the interest of consensus (as they often provide insight into larger social/political dynamics that are informing the data).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To use a variety of methods to enable interconnected analyses at the individual, social, cultural, and institutional levels.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To conceive of action on multiple levels over the course of the CPAR project.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To continue an ongoing negotiation of conditions of collaboration, building research relationships over time.

* Public Science Project (<http://publicscienceproject.org/principles-and-values/>)

A Counterspace Research Design

When designing the counterspace session in the original study, I found it helpful to engage the key components of the critical dialogue cycle:

- (1) An initial identification of the problem or issue;
- (2) Observe and collect pertinent data (which will be a continuance of the individual interview data collected through CNA, along with new data developed in the counterspace);

- (3) Critically reflect on the data;
- (4) Plan for action;
- (5) Take action; and
- (6) Begin the research cycle again with further data collection to assess the effects of the action.

These components took place across three stages. Stage One was the problem-posing stage. In this session, the mothers worked together to determine which issue they would like to address within the contexts of narratives of mothering and work. The goal was to address an issue experienced by all of the women linked to the original individual interviews collected using CNA and in regard to the narratives and/or the hegemonic forces that contributed to the production and maintenance of the unjust and oppressive experiences. The group decided to address the lack of resources available to mothers in the workplace. Table 2 illustrates the guided discussion questions that were co-developed with the participants and used in the critical dialogue leading to the final output of the counterspace, which was a list of recommendations that each participant could take back to their organizations in order to address the lack of resources available to mothers in the workplace.

Table 2: Guided Discussion Questions for Critical Dialogue with Mothers of Color

Who Are You?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide an opportunity for the mothers to make connections and get to know each other • Start the empowerment process by the mothers defining and identifying themselves in terms of empowerment • Introduce the CPAR process
Mothering and Work Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve dialogue around the mother's own mothering and work experiences • Revisit themes drawn from individual interviews • Dialogue about their interactions with the narratives of mothering and work and the people who are involved in those narratives (spouses, children, employers, etc.)
Facilitating Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify potential leverage points where we can create personal or social change • And/or influence narratives, policy, legislation, etc.

Now What?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster a discussion that promotes individual and/or group action • Development of an output, to be decided by the participants. Possibilities include a collective support group, a declaration, an active working group, etc.
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Stage Two was facilitated through the generation and review of themes relevant to the discussion and problem addressed. The themes emerged from the CNA analysis of the interviews and through the dialogue during the counterspace. Some themes identified were the need for:

- designated breastfeeding areas, which the participants connected to the narratives of *control* and *maintaining the work and family binary*;
- reserved parking for pregnant mothers in organizations that operated on large sized campuses, which the participants connected to the narratives of *control*, *othering*, and the *patriarchal and neoliberal interpretation of return on investment*;
- lack of manageable and flexible work schedules, which the participants connected to the narratives of *control* and *oppression/ownership*;
- paternity leave, which the participants connected to the narratives of *hyper-masculinity*, *gendered work* and *traditional gender roles*; and
- training for managers on best practices and policies for family-friendly workplaces, which the participants connected to the narratives of *othering*, *control* and *maintaining the work and family binary*; (Dillard, 2018).

Stage Three served as both an individual and group process to conceptualize the participants' experiences in relation to offering solutions and strategies for change. Because CPAR methodologies are centered on the individual, it is important to note that large-scale social change is not a required product of counter-spaces or critical dialogue. Perez-Da Silva notes, "macro-level transformations may or may not result from CPAR; instead, the movement of the participants from isolation to engagement, from fear to confidence, or from self-doubt to social critique at the micro-level may be the end result" (2016, pp. 45-46). The results of this experience had both the micro and macro-level transformations. From the micro-level perspective, the participants were able to resist the master narratives through the empowerment of their own counter-narratives. Some examples included below in Table 3.

Theme	Counter-narrative	Micro-level Transformation
Designated Breastfeeding Area	I control my body.	From fear to confidence
Reserved 'Pregnancy' Parking	My needs, my health and my safety are valid.	From guilt to security
Manageable/Flexible Work Schedule	I can reclaim my time and set boundaries.	From oppression to empowerment
Paternity Leave	The importance of my career and desire to return to work is legitimate; so is my need for my husband to support our family.	From self-doubt to social critique
Training	As a mother, I should not carry my organization's burdens for an inclusive workplace.	From burdened to liberation

Table 3: Micro-level Transformations

From the macro-level perspective, the participants were able to engage the organization in a change-process facilitated by the list of recommendations developed in Stage Two. It is important to note that the micro-level implications fostered a sense of empowerment that worked to further the potential of the macro-level implications. The participants felt a renewed sense of their potential in creating change in their organizations.

Implications Beyond Mothering and Work Research

Martín-Baró's framework for liberation psychology articulated the need for the discipline to actively and critically assess its epistemological roots and its connection to the oppression of marginalized groups (Torre, et al., 2012). Martín-Baró argued that in order for psychologists to understand and contribute to interrupting injustice, they need to attend to the ways the production of knowledge is shaped by social, historical, and political systems. In other words, researchers must challenge the designs of their studies to answer questions about the purpose of research, who benefits, who is made vulnerable, and how might it facilitate social transformation. I believe that the methodological approach of combining CNA and CPAR in research can answer this call, thus, having significant implications relevant to scholarship and research beyond the topic of mothering and work.

In fact, some cases have already been made regarding the efficacy of taking a combined CNA and CPAR approach. Aranda and Street's (2001) critical praxis study of nurse-patient friendship centered the stories of nurses to challenge dominant narratives within clinical nursing practice. Through the sharing of the individual stories, they begin to realize that they each had experiences where (1) they developed very close, personal relationships with their patients, (2) the grief from separation and/or death was profound, and (3) they never shared these stories or feelings with their peers due to the "fear of being judged harshly by peers" (p. 795). As they developed critical consciousness, they began to link their personal stories to a master narrative within nursing

of *power, respectability and appropriateness*. Through these master narratives one can see how power and control were manifested and shaped their behaviors as well as their practice. The new knowledge generated in the action component of the research informed their professional standards related to nurse-patient practice, with particular interest in an investigation of power dynamics and re-defining interpretations of appropriate boundaries and levels of engagement.

Another example of CNA and CPAR being used in health research is Wright et al.'s (2006) study which sought to center the knowledge of patients and carers in determining research priorities in cancer research. The CNA and CPAR approach was significant in this context considering that a survey by the US National Cancer Institute found that patients and carers "felt that research often supported the interests of clinicians and academics more than the communities being researched" (p. 9). This sentiment is also supported by the National Cancer Research Institute which has suggested that "a key component in enhancing public confidence in cancer research is a greater involvement of people affected by the disease in research and research prioritization" (p. 9). Wright and his colleagues made a significant contribution to the CNA and CPAR approach by recruiting both patients and carers into their participatory research groups. By having two distinct, yet connected affected groups involved, the researchers were able to provide a wide perspective on priorities of those affected by cancer. This diversity of perspective has implications to the research, as well as to the relationships between the patient and carers themselves. Additionally, by including carers in the study, the researchers were able to access more vulnerable patients. These patients were able to participate, since their carers would be there to step in if any care was needed during the study.

Marine et al.'s (2019) study on the role of university student affairs professionals (SAPs) in advancing gender inclusive housing (GIH) also included two groups of participants. However, in this study, the need for two groups emerged as the study progressed. As the personal narratives of the SAPs were shared, they exposed that the values related to the implementation of GIH were split between two distinct ideologies of *resistance* and *normativity*. The resistance group centered the housing needs of transgender students due to the vulnerable nature of their identities, while the normative group was less inclined, as they considered the population numbers to be too small to validate the investment. However, once these views were exposed, it was clearer for the groups to identify (and address) the crux of the roadblocks towards implementing GIH on their campus. Ultimately, they were able to collectively understand and connect the resistance and normative discourses to the larger master narrative of neoliberalism in the university. This master narrative is typically at odds with queerness due to its values of quantifiable productivity (profit-driven activities) and control (regulations of normalization). Engaging in the CNA and CPAR approach helped the SAPs develop a new set of GIH policies and practices that incorporated greater "awareness of trans students and their specific needs within these institutional spaces" (p.220).

One final study, also in the educational research space that utilized the CNA and CPAR approach is Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica's (2020) study on the "potential equity and culturally responsive leadership contributions of Latinx administrators" (p. 289). Through counterstories, the researchers found that the Latinx School Administrators used elements of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), to inform their approach to educational equity and to counter majoritarian narratives (i.e., deficit-based models) in educational administration that "often reify the majority White administrative and teacher experience as normal or natural" (p.295). Yosso describes Community Cultural Wealth as the ways in which people of color use "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). By centering their leadership in the Community Cultural Wealth of the Latinx community, the

administrators were able to develop and share best practices that served to support each other, support the students and create district-level change to educational equity policy and practice.

Conclusions

Research that combines CNA and CPAR responds to the call for a science of the oppressed rather than for the oppressed, that designs research from the perspective of those most impacted by injustice (Torre, et. al., 2012, p.10). Through centering the analysis and focus of the research on the voices and experiences of the participants, we can introduce a fresh perspective and interpretation to the privileged frameworks that dominate academic space. As noted by Mohanty (2003), research in this vein is vital to “uncover how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses...[through] discourse that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, that is, the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse” (p. 21). The approach in this research – a combination of CNA and CPAR, challenges the inherent absoluteness of master narratives and creates space for diverse perspectives to be included in the knowledge and meaning making, which has invaluable implications for research across disciplines. While the context of this research was through a Black feminist lens, the analysis of discourse and narratives is not bounded in feminist studies. As such, research utilizing CNA and CPAR can overcome the disciplinary boundaries that we tend to set on the appropriateness of methods used. CNA and CPAR research also has implications for practice and policy. By allowing the individuals who are most impacted by organizational issues design the appropriate mediations and recommendations, employees become empowered to engage in their organization’s success, which in term can lead to more meaningful and direct changes to policy that reflects their exact needs.

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