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On the Historical and Conceptual Foundations of a Community Psychology of Social Transformation

Ravi Gokani,¹ and Richard T. G. Walsh²

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Abstract We examine historical and conceptual literature in community psychology in order to understand the field's potential to be the socially transformative subdiscipline of psychology to which it aspires. By reviewing papers from two prominent journals and other literature, we conclude that the claim that community psychology is well-suited to social transformation, because it is a product of Sixties' radicalism and is theoretically equipped, is untenable. Systematic accounts of the subdiscipline's origins suggest that the transformative aspirations of current community psychologists do not correspond to the subdiscipline's reformist past. Furthermore, in analyzing three related concepts currently employed in the field—social justice, power, and *praxis*—we show that each suffers from conceptual ambiguity and a restricted political scope. These conceptual flaws, coupled with community psychology's historical inclination toward social reform, inhibit the possibility of contributing to radical social transformation. We conclude that neither questionable historical claims nor ambiguous and politically dubious concepts support a community psychology of social transformation. We offer solutions for the historical and conceptual problems we identify and, as a broader solution to the problem of engaging in socially transformative work, propose that

community psychologists should seek direct political engagement in solidarity with other citizens as fellow citizens not as psychologists.

Keywords Community psychology theory · Social reform · Social transformation · Social justice · Power · Praxis

Since the earliest decades of this subdiscipline of psychology, community psychologists have differentiated between changes affecting individuals and changes affecting social systems, as captured by the terms first-order and second-order change, and ameliorative and transformative change (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). First-order and ameliorative change denote what we term “social reform,” while second-order and transformative change denote what we term “social transformation.” A politically progressive shift toward social transformation has occurred over the last decades in the oral and written discourse of community psychology. This discursive shift seems to imply that our subdiscipline has broader political implications and that some form of this social transformation either was or is one of the field's inherent features. These suggestions are evident in various common expressions in the field, such as the call for community psychologists to engage in systems-change (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007; Peirson, Boydell, Ferguson & Ferris, 2011) or to promote liberation from oppression (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). In this paper, we evaluate these suggestions by examining the field's historical and conceptual literature that explicitly and implicitly serves to justify them. Our review shows a contradiction between the aim of social

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transformation and the field's historical and conceptual foundations that, we conclude, better fit social reform than social transformation.

In reviewing the historical literature concerning community psychology, we employed standard historiographical methods in psychology (Walsh, Teo & Baydala, 2014). Thus, we consulted: (a) the primary-source document published about the founding Swampscott Conference of 1965 (Bennett et al., 1966), and (b) first-person accounts from those who participated in the subdiscipline's founding in the USA and Canada or were leaders of the second generation of community psychologists; these accounts appeared in historical studies of this period (Kelly, 1987; Walsh, 1987a, 1987b). Our historical review indicates that in their accounts of the field's origins current community psychologists have attributed a greater presence of social transformation to it than the evidence can support. Regarding our conceptual review, three concepts seem to capture the discursive shift in the field toward social transformation: social justice, power, and *praxis*. We discuss two major problems common to each: (a) their use, in differing ways, is conceptually ambiguous and (b) again in differing ways, whatever discernible meaning these concepts have seems to be better suited to social reform because of their apparent, restricted political scope. We conclude by discussing possible solutions to these historical and conceptual problems.

A Psychological Enterprise of Social Transformation or Social Reform?

Historical Case for Social Transformation

From a critical historical perspective on psychology (Walsh et al., 2014), a tendency to exaggerate aspects of its origins can lead to flawed accounts of its past. In the practice of historiography (i.e., systematic historical inquiry), this bias is known as presentism (Harris, 2009), meaning current interests can affect scholars' interpretations of past events, particularly if oral histories are privileged and evidence from archival and documentary sources is neglected. For example, after World War Two, mass conversion to a methodological consensus of quantitative laboratory experimentation occurred across psychology (Walsh et al., 2014). In this context, social psychologists described the pre-war origins of their field as primarily experimental in nature. However, scrutiny of published research showed that diverse methods actually were the norm during social psychology's early decades (Danziger, 1990). In effect, a presentist narrative served as an ahistorical "origin myth" about social psychology (Samelson, 1974).

Many accounts of community psychology's origins also are presentist in that authors of these accounts attribute to the field's origins the present concern for political progressiveness, partly by using the terms we review. The result is a misleading narrative in which authors cast social transformation as central to the field from its inception. By contrast, a documented account shows that social transformation is a more recent emphasis in the subdiscipline's literature. Below, we contrast presentist accounts with the historical record, which shows that community psychology in the USA was rooted in the community mental health movement.

Problematic Historical Accounts

At least since the Eighties community psychologists have tended to characterize the subdiscipline as a child of the mythical Sixties. Many authors have claimed that an intrinsic feature of community psychology's origins was the founders' identification with the allegedly transformative impetus of social movements during that era (e.g., Elias, 1987). Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002) asserted that community psychology was "critically energized by the call for civil rights, the War on Poverty, and notions of distributive justice" (p. 479). Echoing the view that community psychology was founded in the context of "major social movements," Wolff and Swift (2008) stated that contemporaneous social issues "became, if not part of the text, an important part of the subtext for the Swampscott [Massachusetts] conference" (p. 610), and that "[r]eal world community psychologists were among the leaders of the conference... advocating for action to address the social justice issues of the day" (p. 610). Although Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) asserted that the field was originally animated by "radical impulses (p. 178)", they conceded that this purported inclination was more a rhetorical expression than a lived political commitment. All told, problematic accounts claim that founding community psychologists expected to "become allies with oppressed groups in the struggle for social justice" (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 749). Community psychologists have strayed from their original commitment to social justice, this general account goes, and they should reclaim it. However, in our view, this narrative is incorrect and misleading.

When the US American subdiscipline emerged (see Walsh, 1988, on its Canadian origins), the nation was beset by Black Americans demanding their civil and economic rights, the impact of poverty on a significant minority of US Americans, escalation of the war in Vietnam that many perceived as unjust, and increasing assertiveness by women for gender equality (Zinn, 2005). Thus, Kelly (2002) identified the social context for

community psychology's emergence as "the turbulence of racism in the 1950s...the second wave of the women's movement, and the Vietnam War" (p. 51). Weinstein (2006) noted that addressing "social problems, social settings, and social change" was part of the field's "promissory note" (p. 11). However, when the US field was founded in 1965, these social issues as well as international struggles to overthrow colonial regimes barely penetrated the discourse of psychology, community psychology's parent discipline (Walsh et al., 2014). Academic psychologists at that time typically did not participate directly in social change, such as the civil rights movement. Even members of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), one of the few groups of psychologists interested in social action, concentrated on research, not research *and* action (Walsh & Gokani, 2014).

Although the founders of community psychology admired the social movements of the day, they were neither affiliated with SPSSI nor practiced the Lewinian tradition of social-action research, partly because their clinical training excluded applied social psychology (Walsh, 1987b). If the early community psychologists joined social movements, they did so as citizens and did not describe such engagement in the field's literature. Interest in social transformation, despite Rappaport's (1981) and Seidman's (1988) exhortations, was rather modest until the Nineties, when other community psychologists began to advocate for it and social justice (e.g., Bond & Mulvey, 2000; Maton, 2000; Moane, 2003; Nelson, 2013; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997, 2002; Prilleltensky & Nelson 2009; Prilleltensky, 2001, 2008; Prilleltensky 2012; Watts, Griffith & Abdul-Adil, 1999). If the prominent social issues of the day were the main subject of community psychologists' research and action, the literature does not show it (Walsh, 1987a). For instance, the predominantly male members of the new field were disconnected from the revival of feminism, which the marginalized status of women in early community psychology reflected (Mulvey, 1988). In fact, the new field's context was the community mental health movement.

Origins in Community Mental Health

According to the primary-source document (Bennett et al., 1966), the explicit purpose of the Swampscott Conference was to define the roles for clinical psychologists within a new mission of community mental health. Two psychiatrists, Erich Lindemann and Gerald Caplan, and funding from the National Institute of Mental Health helped shape community psychology as a profession that could implement the mandate of nation-wide, community mental

health services including prevention (Kelly, 1987). The conference participants, with one exception all men, discussed how psychologists might serve as social change agents and community developers. They debated whether community mental health should incorporate interventions to overcome "degrading social conditions" and become directly "involved in advocacy and public policy" or "to promote prevention as the goal of social change" (Walsh, 1987b, p. 528). The eventual consensus was that "psychologists would serve as proponents of the concept of community in community mental health work, advocates for the poor and minorities, and active participants in and contributors to social and political life" (Walsh, 1987b, p. 528; see also Bennett et al., 1966).

Clearly, the consensus was not an agenda for enacting social transformation as practiced by the social movements of the Sixties typically cited in presentist accounts. Rather, it was an agenda for reforming the status quo by means of community mental health. Founding community psychologists avoided association with contemporary Black American and White political activists, because they were concerned about losing their academic legitimacy in the eyes of their more powerful peers during the field's crucial formative years (Walsh, 1987a). To survive academically, the founders engaged in mainstream research practices, which partially explain the individual-centered content and conventional research relationships in the first decade of articles in the field's journals (Walsh, 1987a). For example, the first editor of this journal was Charles Spielberger whose stress research was said to enhance the subdiscipline's credibility (Walsh, 1987a). All told, the social climate of academic psychology constrained actualizing socially transformative aims that later have been attributed to the early community psychologists, while the quest for academic legitimacy shaped the new field's community research and action.

Some community psychologists have acknowledged the founders' ambivalence about the need for political relevance (e.g., Seidman, 1988). Perhaps this ambivalence, which affected later generations of community psychologists, prompted another founder, Reiff (1975), to criticize the inclination he perceived among his peers to emulate "techni-pros" focused on technical skills. The new field's lack of social activism also might have inspired Rappaport (1981) to arouse it to social action by christening it "a social movement." Seidman (1988) echoed this exhortation, advocating for an "action science" that challenged the status quo (p. 4). Nevertheless, such clarion calls are incongruous historically unless there was an identifiable gap between the social values that early community psychologists espoused and those they practiced in their academic work. The desire to connect with social movements that Rappaport (1981) expressed stood in contrast to the

reformist work at the micro level of analysis that most community psychologists had been doing to ensure their academic survival (Walsh, 1987a).

Overall, then, although the early generations of North American community psychologists generally advocated “social change,” they researched community mental health issues (Walsh, 1987b). The latter proved to be the main impetus for establishing and maintaining the field. Accordingly, the evidence for the more recent claim that over the decades community psychologists have strayed from their allegedly original, progressive roots of social transformation is weak. The documented, hence stronger, conclusion is that the field pursued social reform, not transformation, from its founding years (Kelly, 1987; Walsh, 1987a, 1987b). To be clear, we are not suggesting that this earlier reformist work is of lesser value or importance to the field or to the communities in which community psychologists work; we aim only to point out this work was not transformative, contrary to presentist accounts of the subdiscipline’s origins.

Conceptual Case for Social Transformation

Community psychologists who discuss social transformation often employ potentially radical concepts, such as social justice, power, and *praxis*. Complementing presentist accounts of the field’s founding years, these concepts seem to provide authors with the political relevance of a socially transformative enterprise. Consequently, understanding the nature of community psychologists’ concepts is crucial to understanding the field’s potential for social transformation. As Todd and Rufa (2013) put it with reference to social justice, “how one defines [it] likely contributes to how one pursues [it]” (p. 316). If any of social justice, power, and *praxis* is defined conservatively in the political, economic, or social sense, it could provide community psychologists with a conceptual justification for reform but not transformation of the status quo. On the other hand, if any of them is defined progressively, it could provide a valuable conceptual tool in the struggle to realize social transformation.

Based on our review of the literature, community psychologists’ use of the three concepts generally suffers from two major flaws, discussed below, which undermine each concept’s rhetorical power and transformative utility. The first flaw is conceptual ambiguity, which stems from the presence of multiple, at times contradictory, formulations, usually without authors noting conflict or debate among competing formulations. The second flaw is a restricted political scope, meaning formulations of a concept are too narrowly defined, often blunting its sociopolitical implications, which is an inclination that suits social reform, not transformation.

Problems with the Concept of Social Justice

The concept that has come to enjoy pride of place in the oral and written discourse of North American community psychology is social justice. It is discussed in several texts (e.g., Kloos et al., 2012; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010); it is the topic of numerous publications (e.g., Evans, Rosen & Nelson, 2014; Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Prilleltensky, 2012; Prilleltensky & Fox, 2007; Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003); and the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) (2016) explicitly has incorporated it as a core value and goal. But social justice is plagued by conceptual ambiguity, a primary reason for which might be the presence of multiple existing definitions (Evans et al., 2014; Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002). For instance, while Prilleltensky (2012) defines “justice” as either distributive or procedural, adding intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, and community “subtypes,” SCRA’s (2016) definition excludes Prilleltensky’s (2012) categories but includes “prevention of violence” and “active citizenry.” Watts et al. (2003) discuss justice in their work on sociopolitical development, but their formulation relies more on the concept of oppression and excludes distributive or procedural justice. While some scholars have attempted to ground social justice empirically (e.g., Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002), disparate varieties of social justice remain endemic in the field.

In addition, the literature lacks consensus or even debate about what type of social justice community psychologists seek. The most common type of social justice discussed among the many inquiries is distributive justice. For instance, Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) defined social justice as “The fair and equitable allocation of bargaining power, resources, and obligations in society” (p. 168) and “the fair distribution of societal resources” (p. 171). Similarly, when defining oppression as social justice’s opposite, Watts et al. (2003) stated that “as a process” oppression is “the unjust exercise of power by one socially salient group over another in a way that *creates and sustains inequity in the distribution of coveted resources*” (p. 186, emphasis added). Society for Community, Research, and Action (2016) and other authors have taken an identical or similar position, resulting in a strong push to adopt distributive justice as key to social justice (e.g., Baffour & Chonody, 2009; Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2007; Evans et al., 2014; Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Kloos et al., 2012; Prilleltensky & Fox, 2007; Seidman, 1988; Speer, 2008; Torres-Harding, Siers & Olson, 2012).

Although distributive justice serves as a thread woven through the subdiscipline’s multiple formulations of social justice, that thread, in our opinion, is quite thin. As with social justice, conceptualizations of distributive justice are

punctuated by the gaps that could be filled by engagement with academic works from outside of community psychology (see Lamont & Favor, 2013; for a summary on distributive justice); minor exceptions to this observation include passing references to theorists such as Sandel (Prilleltensky, 2012) and Rawls (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002) and work from within social psychology (Drew, Bishop & Syme, 2002). But generally, community psychologists have not properly contextualized either distributive justice or social justice to reflect the often heterogeneous perspectives from other disciplines that convey the complexity of these concepts. As a result, community psychology's concepts of social justice appear more simplified, unchallenged, and ambiguous than they do in other scholarly fields.

Moreover, community psychologists' use of social justice is problematic because of the concept's restricted political scope. Although in theory, we agree with the aims of distributive justice as conveyed in the field's discourse, concretely this formulation of social justice presents some obstacles to social transformation. First, by failing to challenge social, cultural, institutional, and economic systems that produce inequalities in the first place distributive justice can naturalize social systems of exploitation. Actualizing distributive justice, if achievable in current North American societies, might simultaneously leave exploitive social and ideological systems intact, rendering this conception of social justice essentially reformist politically. In fact, the literature we reviewed implicitly regarded political transformation of social institutions as unnecessary in the few cases when it was acknowledged.

Second, one could argue that the "resources" being distributed might themselves be inherently oppressive, socially *unjust* or, in Marcuse's (1964) language, instruments of social control. For instance, does distributing micro-credit among impoverished third-world farmers constitute resources adequate for the realization of social transformation (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010)? Although the acquisition of debt and money might grant access to basic necessities that help to *alleviate* hunger and other biological and social stressors, "such remedies," to quote Oscar Wilde (2001), "do not cure the disease... indeed, [they] are part of the disease" (para. 2, "The Soul of Man under Socialism"). Marx detailed the embeddedness of money and debt in the social relations of inequality that produce their value (Tucker, 1978). In the present neoliberal era, financial and economic sources of oppression are abundant (e.g., Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012). Accordingly, we would argue that access to credit, particularly for those who are desperate, illiterate, or under economic pressure from multinationals, more likely constitutes amelioration and risks complicity with oppressive institutions (e.g.,

multinational banks). Access to credit per se cannot constitute social transformation of financial and economic conditions.

Problems with the Concept of Power

Power also seems to be conceptually ambiguous in community psychology's discourse. This ambiguity is partly due to a lack of consensus or even engagement among the multiple formulations circulating within the subdiscipline. Neal and Neal (2011) identified three prominent concepts of power: psychopolitical (e.g., Prilleltensky, 2003), social (e.g., Speer & Hughey, 1995), and relational power (e.g., Serrano-García, 1994). Neal and Neal (2011) then proposed their own conceptualization of power, situating it in the "structure" of relationships. Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010), noting the "relative infancy of a power theory in community psychology," introduced a theory of power from political science (p. 215). Angeli-que, Rodriguez, Culley, Brown and Binette (2013) found the concepts of psychopolitical, social, and relational power in their analysis, too, but also discerned several other, small clusters of discussions on power within the field. Elsewhere, Angeli-que (2008) stressed the importance of the Foucauldian perspective on power, which, with the exception of a few passing citations (e.g., Christens & Perkins, 2008; Prilleltensky, 2008), has received scant attention in the field. Alternatively, Davidson et al. (2006) affirmed the conceptualization of power present in the critical theory tradition (see also Angeli-que, 2008). However, to our knowledge, Neal and Neal (2011) are perhaps the only community psychologists who have published an attempt to connect the competing or overlapping formulations of power.

In addition to the multiple theoretical possibilities of power, conceptual ambiguity is compounded by lack of clarity concerning whether use of the noun power is theoretical or colloquial. Angeli-que (2008) noted that often multiple adjectives precede power without sufficient exposition of their implications for the term. Moreover, when usage seems more theoretical than colloquial, it is not always clear which particular formulation of power is meant. By contrast, some scholars are clear about their definitions, such as J. Neal (2014) on network power. But overall, the existence of multiple meanings compromises comprehensibility.

Concerning community psychology's marquee concept, empowerment, Cattaneo, Calton and Brodsky (2014) asserted that "diffuse use of [the concept] has now rendered it more buzz word than call to action" (p. 434). In our view, the same conclusion pertains to the literature on power. Interestingly, the concept has had a murky relationship with empowerment (Neal & Neal, 2014).

Although some explanations of this relationship exist (e.g., Prilleltensky, 2001), substantive elaboration is necessary in order to overcome conceptual ambiguity. This task is particularly important, because the subdiscipline's conceptual identity has long depended on empowerment theory, and many authors have either noted the obvious relationship between the two concepts or twinned power with empowerment. Moreover, the failure to explain sufficiently the relationship between the two might lead community psychologists to overlook the pitfalls of empowerment theory when conceptualizing power. As Riger (1993) argued, empowerment relies on subjective criteria (e.g., perception of empowerment) in determining objective empowerment. As it happens, this criticism might also apply to power. Prilleltensky (2008), for example, posited the crucial role of social relationships in his concept of psychopolitical validity, but theorized power as a property of individuals' "subjective manifestation of the societal distribution of power" (Fryer, 2008, p. 242). Riger (1993) also claimed that empowerment is androcentric, which again applies to power in that several community psychologists defined it in terms of masculine notions of control, conflict, and mastery of the world to satisfy one's needs (e.g., Brooker & Eakin, 2001; Prilleltensky, 2001; Serrano-García, 1994).

As to the political scope of power, like social justice, it is limited by community psychologists' reliance on notions of distributive justice. For example, Serrano-García (1994) defined power as a "social relationship characterized by the presence of two agents, within an historically asymmetrical material base, which are in *conflict over a resource which one of them controls and the other covets*" (p. 9, emphasis added). Other authors addressing power have considered the allocation of resources and their asymmetric distribution, which Neal and Neal (2011) regarded as central to conceptions of power. Prilleltensky (2001) defined the first component of their formulation of power as "access to valued material and psychological resources" (p. 145). Although he did not propose his own conception of power, McCubbin (2001) argued that resource allocation, "whether affective, material, or symbolic," is the context for "power relations" between individuals (p. 78). As in the case of social justice, we agree philosophically with the aim of distributive justice, but unreflective reliance on it yields the two dubious characteristics already noted: distribution leaves oppressive systems intact, and resources might be forms of control from within those systems.

Additional critiques of the restricted political scope of power within community psychology's discourse appear in a special issue of the *Journal of Community Psychology* on psychopolitical validity. The critiques include the view that power is political (Prilleltensky, 2008); that any

conceptualization must recognize history (Reich, Pinkard & Davidson, 2008); that cultural assumptions within Bronfenbrenner's macro-level limit the generalizability of formulations of power (Fisher & Sonn, 2008); and that power perhaps is not reducible to the individual nor is the "collective" reducible to multiple individuals (Fryer, 2008). These criticisms, as well as those we have identified ourselves, appear to validate Prilleltensky's (2008) somewhat ironic warning that "we sometimes use our power to define power in such a way that we are not affected by it!" (p. 117).

Problems with the Concept of Praxis

Within the critical emancipatory tradition, *praxis* is defined as the dialectical cycle of reflection and transformative action; that is, such action always occurs in dialectical relation to reflection (e.g., Freire, 1997). But in contrast to Freire's (1997) lucid definition and acknowledgement of the term's indebtedness to Hegel and Marx, many community psychologists tend to employ *praxis* loosely, again leading to conceptual ambiguity. The net effect is the dilution of an otherwise radical concept, intimately connected with social transformation, which renders *praxis* in a less potent form that is compatible with reform rather than transformation.

One cause of the ambiguity of *praxis* is the tendency by some authors to ignore one or more crucial components (i.e., the dialectic, reflection, and transformative action) or replace it with a concept devoid of theoretical justification. Some have defined the dialectic, a concept and intellectual practice with a long and specific history, as a "knowledge-generating cycle" (Newbrough, 1992, p. 20); a process of "willed action" in which reflection "becomes" action (Elias, 1994, p. 308); a "translation" (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 749); a "linking" (Williams, 2008, p. 144); an "interplay" (Partridge, 2008, p. 162), "interaction" (p. 165), or "negotiation" (p. 166); and a "synergy" (Watts et al., 2003, p. 193).

The second component of *praxis*, "reflection," refers to individuals' reflections on the concrete material conditions of their oppressed state and/or to their reflection on the actions they have taken to overcome that state (Freire, 1997). But community psychologists have replaced reflection with weaker political variants, such as "philosophy" (Elias, 1994, p. 301), "theory" and "ethical reflection" (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 749), and psychopolitical validity (Williams, 2008).

As to its action component, *praxis* denotes the acts of oppressed individuals or groups intending to transform their oppressive conditions (Freire, 1997). Yet community psychologists have substituted action for "practice" (Newbrough, 1992, p. 20), described action as attempts to alter

the training and reward structure of a policing institution (Williams, 2008), or defined action as an “activity through which social life is lived” (Partridge, 2008, pp. 165–166).

Taken together, these changes to the essential features of *praxis* not only alter its meaning, they sever it from its critical philosophical tradition, thereby stripping the concept of its original intention of emancipation from oppression (Freire, 1997). In fact, some community psychologists simply equate *praxis* with “practice,” a colloquial use of the term (e.g., Bertram, Hall, Fine & Weis, 2000; Bishop, Vicary, Browne & Guard, 2009; Townley, Kloos, Green & Franco, 2011). We recognize *praxis* can be used this way in the term’s non-technical sense. The same might be said of its components and of the concepts of power and, to a lesser extent, social justice. To be clear, we are not suggesting that none but the strictest use of *praxis*, or any term, is the only valuable use; we recognize that concepts can develop over time and that this development can be fruitful. However, we are asserting that the use of *praxis* within community psychology’s discourse is ambiguous. Therefore, problems of meaning arise when the term with its rich philosophical (i.e., transformative) heritage is only given the semantic weight of colloquial (i.e., reformist) use. Confusion is compounded when such ambiguous use occurs against the discursive backdrop of the field’s current rhetoric of social transformation.

In contrast to the concept’s original meaning, community psychologists’ discussions of *praxis* also seem to reflect a restricted political scope. This originally revolutionary concept apparently has become synonymous with mere practical applications. Such a semantic alteration suits social reform but not social transformation. Depoliticizing of *praxis* in the community psychology literature has occurred in at least two other ways. One is by failing to address liberation from oppression, perhaps the major theme of Freire’s (1997) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Instead, for instance, Partridge (2008) fit *praxis* to “community research and action” (p. 168). Williams (2008) applied it to the institution of policing in a particular police station and reform of its training and reward structure, but not to policing in general with its potential for oppression of local communities, as has occurred in numerous North American locales. In another example Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) described *praxis* as “what lies between what is desirable and what is achievable” (p. 158). This politically pragmatic interpretation of *praxis* reminds us of the infamous 1867 definition of politics not by an advocate of social transformation but by Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor of the established German empire: “Politics is the art of the possible.” If *praxis* only represents the interface between the desirable and the possible, then *praxis* becomes the antithesis of social

transformation, namely, social reform, and is likely to justify political maneuvers practiced by and for the establishment.

The second way in which community psychologists narrow the political scope of *praxis* is by attributing to it a methodological or epistemological dimension (e.g., Newbrough, 1992; Partridge, 2008; Prilleltensky, 2001). Following Newbrough’s (1992) description of *praxis* as a “knowledge-generating cycle,” (p. 20), Partridge (2008) defined *praxis* as “a way of learning that embodies ethical and political theory and practice in the real world” (p. 165) and leads to ethical and political decision-making. The insertion of research-like concepts into *praxis* suggests to us uncritical faith in the potential for psychological research to complement reflection in an emancipatory process. Perhaps few community psychologists would repudiate such faith. But in our view situating psychological research as conventionally conceived and practiced in mainstream psychology into *praxis* neglects how psychological research, even community psychology research, can be and has been a source and symptom of oppression (Walsh et al., 2014). Moreover, the insertion of research into *praxis* masks a dynamic of unbalanced power that militates against liberation; the oppressed rarely plan, execute, analyze, and theorize psychological research. Moreover, if emancipation is tied to conventional research relationships and sources of funding, then the oppressed are bound to both for their liberation, which could implicate community psychologists as potential sources and symptoms of oppression.

Concluding Remarks

Examining the community psychology literature to consider the field’s potential to contribute to social transformation has revealed historical and conceptual problems. Below, we sketch possible solutions that hopefully can place the field on a firmer foundation.

Historical Problems and Solutions

The current and popular notion that community psychology is a child of the allegedly radical Sixties from which it has strayed and to which it should return cannot be supported historically. Such a presentist interpretation of the field’s actual history of social reform seems to serve as an origin myth that can be particularly misleading for those, such as students, who might be disillusioned by the field’s reformist practices. We hope that knowledge of this problem will help prevent future errors of the same nature. Our historical analysis relied on critical history, which can prevent creating and perpetuating misleading

accounts of the past and foster clearer thinking about psychologists' current interests (Harris, 2009; Walsh et al., 2014).

Conceptual Problems and Solutions

Conceptually, the subdiscipline's discourse on social justice, power, and *praxis* shows that typically authors ambiguously describe and depoliticize them. In addition, community psychologists tend to cast concepts like social justice as transformational, when the examples they give typically illustrate social reform. By contrast, scholars in other disciplines, fields, and professions tend to have a more interdisciplinary focus, and therefore, seem more fluent in the development of conceptual work from across academic disciplines (e.g., critical race, post-colonial, feminist, queer, and critical theories of political economy and society). Thus, an initial possible solution for the field's conceptual problems is to expand its scholarly purview, including curriculum, to reflect increasing multidisciplinary. We commend a recent effort to move the field in this direction (see Munger, MacLeod & Loomis, 2016). Moreover, as part of this broader purview North American community psychologists should take more seriously the international literature in community psychology, because it can illuminate diverse conceptual approaches to reform and transformation (e.g., Reich, Riemer, Prilleltensky & Montero, 2007). Perhaps such a broader purview would guard against ambiguity and a restricted political scope, but an attendant danger might be flooding the discipline with even more conceptualizations than exist presently. Therefore, engaging with the formulations that already exist in addition to expanding the scholarly purview is of paramount importance.

Although the above analysis of the historical and conceptual work of the field suggests that it is presently incongruent with the aim of social transformation, the broader problem might be that this aim is unrealistic. Put differently, the historical and conceptual problems we discussed suggest that pursuit of social transformation from within the disciplinary constraints of community psychology is likely to be a Sisyphean task. To understand why, it is important to briefly identify institutional factors that have shaped community psychology as a child of traditional psychology and that remain actively inhibitory. First, since its inception the parent discipline of psychology allied itself with social reform (Walsh et al., 2014), primarily through the assumption of self-contained individuals adapting to society, but it also has excluded social structures, most notably social-class hierarchies under capitalist societies, from its conceptual frameworks (Sarason, 1981). In fact, until the current century a virtual taboo

existed in psychology against investigating social class (Fine & Burns, 2003). Instead, the discipline long has functioned as an administrative science serving educational, industrial, post-industrial, commercial, military, and criminal-justice institutions (Danziger, 1979; Herman, 1995).

Second, although community psychologists often have criticized the broader discipline for its reformist inclinations (e.g., Prilleltensky, 1989; Sarason, 1981), it appears that they less frequently examine critically the subdiscipline's past and present reformist inclinations.

Third, Kelly (2002) candidly observed that community psychologists "are part of the elite society of well-educated professionals" (p. 48), placing them squarely on the opposite side of most, if not all, grassroots struggles from which transformative impulses often emerge. The constraints imposed by community psychologists' privileged socioeconomic status are likely to compromise their capacity to help directly build a transformed society that responds effectively to the urgent ecological-environmental, economic, social, and political problems of our time. The field always has been primarily embedded in postsecondary institutions that are currently governed by neoliberal policies and practices (e.g., Giroux, 2014), which arguably are responsible for much of the harm that society should redress. Relatedly, if community psychologists attempt to be partisans for social transformation, they might experience difficulty attaining tenure or receiving research grants from mainstream sources to fund their community work, a point that Sarason (1976) prophetically made. Thus, tension between community psychologists' attempts to be engaged in communities, on the one hand, and institutional and disciplinary constraints, on the other hand, seems inescapable. Consequently, the social transformation option for community psychology, even if conceptually and politically improved, is likely to be unrealistic. In fact, this status is consistent with the history of other bodies of reputedly progressive psychologists (Walsh & Gokani, 2014) and prompts us to question what community psychologists should do about their genuine commitments to social transformation.

One recommendation we suggest is that community psychologists engage directly in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for social transformation, but as *citizens* and not as academic community psychologists (Walsh & Gokani, 2014). Many important social justice movements today are better platforms for the social transformation that some community psychologists seek from within academia and our subdiscipline. Participation as citizens in these movements would allow community psychologists to express their commitment to social transformation but avoid the limitations that inhere in the disciplinary and institutional settings where they work.

One way perhaps to initiate this commitment is to embrace the international literature in community psychology, because it suggests productive pathways for psychologists' engagement in society (e.g., Reich et al., 2007). Postcolonial liberation psychology, which originated in El Salvador (Martín-Baró, 1994) and, as it happens, derives from Freire's (1997) pedagogy for marginalized peoples, also can exemplify transformative change. However, it would be mistaken to idealize international community psychology and assume that it is, by definition, oriented to social transformation per se.

Although we remain skeptical about community psychology's ability to engage in social transformation for the three reasons we discussed above, engaging in socially transformative work as citizens, with an eye to relevant international examples, could bear fruit for the subdiscipline in untold ways. This, perhaps, is the best pathway to "reclaim social justice" for community psychology by fulfilling a civic duty that we all share but that the field's founders tended to avoid.

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