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For an Anti-capitalist Psychology of Community

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What Is a Psychology of Community?

A psychology of community, as I define it, refers to the tradition of critical community psychology that has embraced the liberation psychology paradigm (see Montero et al., 2017, for a comprehensive discussion here). In this section, I discuss a psychology of community over three stages: first, I define what is meant by critical community psychology; second, I outline some of the key features of liberation psychology; and third, I offer some reflections on how critical community psychology can and has embraced the liberation psychology paradigm, forming what I am calling a psychology of community.

All over the world, critical community psychology emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to what was understood as the conservative and politically regressive currents within mainstream community psychology (Montero, 1996). Some have, however, argued that critical ways of practising psychology within communities existed long before the 1970s (e.g. Fryer, 2008), meaning that we should perhaps understand critical community psychology as encompassing multiple histories (Stevens, 2007). Although critical community psychology represents a range of politically progressive approaches to community psychology, it always takes social justice as its point of departure and in this way constitutes an ever-evolving approach to psychosocial wellbeing, rather than a rigid set of disciplinary orthodoxies (Evans et al., 2017). As such, critical community psychology tends to align with the political agendas of social movements which are concerned with addressing the structural nature of oppression (Burton & Kagan, 2015; Fryer, 2008). Action, social change, and political commitment (rather than theory, permissiveness, and neutrality) are thereby central to critical community psychology praxes (Davidson et al., 2006), as is the fostering of critical consciousness, which Paulo Freire (1972) conceptualised as an attempt to understand oppressive social conditions so that we might change these conditions at a structural level. Relatedly, power—especially social and political power—is a pertinent concern for critical community psychology (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). As Sandy Lazarus (2018) asserts, critical community psychologists work “alongside those most harmed, exposing the psycho-social and political systems that do the most harm and engaging in research and social action to support social justice” (p. 13). Those practising critical community psychology are also encouraged to address issues of power among themselves. Psychologists, community members, and social movements are, in these ways, held accountable to one another as well as to the ideals of social justice (Burton & Kagan, 2015).

In the 1970s, liberation psychology was developed as a reaction to the crisis of relevance within social psychology (Burton & Guzzo, 2020). However, the disparate histories of critical community psychology contrast somewhat with liberation psychology’s trajectory, which most agree finds its formalised origins in the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), a Spanish-born social psychologist and Jesuit priest working in El Salvador. Liberation psychology has been defined as an

emancipatory paradigm or process from which to undertake psychology (Malherbe, 2018), whereby liberation is, itself, conceived of as that which can only be pursued by oppressed majorities, rather than handed over by a privileged elite (Montero et al., 2017). Psychologists who situate themselves in this paradigm work in solidarity with poor and marginalised peoples to understand how oppression is maintained through political, economic, cultural, and social systems and institutions (Enriquez, 1992; Martín-Baró, 1994). In this, the structural roots of oppression are identified in an attempt to understand, and ultimately alleviate, psychic and material distress. Although these aims are similar to those of critical community psychology, liberation psychology tends to be more politically radical in its approach (see Reich et al., 2017). Martín-Baró (1994), perhaps in an attempt to distinguish his work from community psychology, argued that liberation psychology constitutes three elements: (1) a new horizon, whereby psychology is to concern itself with the needs of majority populations rather than institutional legitimacy; (2) a new epistemology, where psychological knowledges are conceived of as democratically constructed, rather than singularly discovered; and (3) a new praxis, where people combine theory and practice to collectively catalyse socially transformative change. These three elements have been advanced in several ways, including participatory action research, qualitative and quantitative research, de-ideologisation, de-alienation, the recovery of historical memory, fostering critical consciousness, problematisation, and de-naturalisation (see Malherbe, 2018; Martín-Baró, 1994; Montero et al., 2017). In recent years, there has been a resurgence of liberation psychology praxes that have taken up the decolonial attitude in important ways, especially in the Global South (see, e.g. Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2019; Carolissen & Duckett, 2018; Kessi et al., 2022; Seedat & Suffla, 2017b; Stevens & Sonn, 2021). In sum, liberation psychology represents an action-oriented and a contextually sensitive way of working with oppressed people to analyse and improve their psycho-social-material realities (Malherbe, 2018; Montero & Sonn, 2009) and to approach mental health not as a set of “natural facts” (Fisher, 2009, p. 19), but as psychological processes that are lodged within a society’s political economy. As such, psychological problems are addressed with collective modes of political action that are attuned to issues of identity, knowledge, consciousness, and culture (Enriquez, 1992; Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

It has been said that critical community psychology has taken to the liberation psychology paradigm more than any other field of psychology (Montero & Sonn, 2009). Certainly, the similarities between the two (e.g. a focus on power, culture, participation, consciousness-raising, praxis, affect, justice, community engagement, and structural oppression) have meant that the distinctive boundaries between each are not always clearly demarcated (Montero et al., 2017). What, we might ask, is the point of collapsing liberation psychology and critical community psychology under a single signifier (namely, a psychology of community) if both are so similar and even, in some cases, difficult to distinguish from one another? I maintain that there are ontological and epistemological differences between the two and when we hold both together, each can embolden the other in different ways. For instance, the