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There is no community practice that is neutral with respect to justice: A call for activist community praxis

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Abstract

The urgent crises of today and tomorrow require a serious interrogation of our professional role, theories of change, and chosen strategies and interventions in and with communities. These intersecting crises require reimagining our practice as activist labor, where our time, energy, and resources are directed at eliminating or minimizing the effects of oppressive social structures and institutions in our society. This paper positions activism in the definition of community psychology practice. Activist community psychology praxis is a practice of resistance and a refusal to be complicit with the systems and structures that create and maintain inequality often in commonplace and practical ways. The activist community psychologist helps to expose, subvert, and challenge social injustices through a combination of activism and praxis. Through critical reflexivity and a process of continual ethical improvement, in the company of others, we can attempt to address the inherent contradictions in our community practice to engage in ways more consistent with liberatory aims.

Our community research and action either contributes to social justice or it serves to maintain the prevailing power structure. In the ongoing fight for racial justice, our practice either contributes to racial equity or sustains racial inequity. There is no community practice that is apolitical or neutral with respect to justice (Freire, 2004). Too often, our knowledge of deep social inequities and their contribution to human suffering "fails to translate into a lived praxis that adequately contests the multiplicity of ways racism, capitalism, homophobia, privilege, and sexism are made manifest" (Tejeda et al., 2003, p.9). The varied manifestations of community psychology practice are both pragmatic and utopian. We seek to engage in community research and action that responds to the immediate needs of communities and minimizes suffering even as we imagine a more just world. But our predominant theories, perspectives, and practices are inadequate for meeting the critical issues that we face. To respond to the intersecting crises of our times we need to move beyond approaches tied to the political and social philosophy of liberalism and employ radical imagination (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010; 2014). We must envision radically different systems and deploy "visionary pragmatism" (Collins, 1998, p. 188) to help in the development of a more politically engaged praxis.

In this paper I make the case that the primary concern of community psychology practice should be the reduction of structural injustice and power imbalances through community-engaged actions following the lead of those most affected by cultural, political, and economic domination and subordination. This requires an honest acknowledgement that most well-intentioned community change efforts of which community psychologists are a part do not effectively undermine deeply entrenched oppression and marginalization. For a variety of reasons, we often find ourselves in community settings unable or unwilling to examine and act against structural dynamics of power and privilege that operate within

and upon our institutions and communities. Too often we end up as accomplices to unreflective, reformist practices remaining too careful not to ruffle the feathers of those in positions of power. Community psychology practitioners cannot purport to be working for social justice without a commitment to "questioning the practices, epistemologies, methods, and

frameworks that contribute to the structures and norms of injustice and oppression" (Sandler, 2007, p. 276). We need to be adept at partnering with our community collaborators to challenge structural injustices "without being co-opted into discourses and practices that simply maintain unjust conditions, or worse, exacerbate them" (Evans, 2015, p. 365).

I define a practitioner as one who takes action in the world from a base of knowledge, skills, competencies, and values, and is both shaped by the prevailing social order and is an active participant in the creation and shaping of that order (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Giddens, 1984). The 2006 definition of community psychology practice expresses a value-driven desire for a community psychology practice that promotes "well-being, social justice, economic equity and self-determination" (Julian, 2006, p. 68). On an ongoing basis, our community of scholar-practitioners can and should interrogate our own blind spots and make judgments about what constitutes better and worse, transformative and ameliorative, competent and incompetent, ethical and unethical community practice. "Radical honesty among community members with shared values can be transformative" (Carruthers, 2018, p. 81). This is the aim of this paper: to engage us in honest critical reflection on our community practice in this current historical, economic, socio-political, and environmental context to radically reimagine a more ethical, reflexive, transformative praxis.

One point of clarification is in order. The issues and challenges raised in this paper are mostly directed at community psychologists like me, and those educated and socialized into systems shaped by, White, privileged, academics and practitioners. Too often we are guilty of operating from a base of naive optimism and racial unconsciousness and too comfortable in liberal systems such as universities and nonprofit organizations that require little ideological struggle. In a sense, this paper is also a way for me to attempt to openly hold myself accountable to use my privilege and institutional resources to engage in community research and action that disrupts rather than maintains injustice. Much like the pack a day smoker seeking social support for quitting, I'm telling my friends I'm trying to quit the deleterious habit of complicity so they will also hold me accountable.

Positioning Activism in the Definition of Community Psychology Practice

I bring a critical-theoretical perspective and a scholar-activist orientation to this paper to expand upon and deepen our ethical-reflective commitment to a radical praxis that rises to the level of injustice faced by communities. Building on these orientations and commitments I offer a definition (with all the attendant problems of defining) for an *activist community praxis* that challenges us to take a more openly political stance in our community research and action.

> *Activist community praxis is anti-oppressive collective action grounded in critical theorizing, critical reflexivity, and a political and ethical commitment to social justice.*

The driving force of anti-oppressive collective action is the practice of joining with others to challenge the complex issues of power,

oppression, and powerlessness (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019). A political and ethical commitment to social justice means taking a stance against neutrality and working with others to actively challenge *structural injustices*, defined here as "pervasive social structures, practices, and norms that lead to disproportionate social suffering for particular categories of people or communities" (Sandler, 2007, p. 278; see also structural violence, Dutta et al., 2016).

Activist community praxis is a critical practice wherein action, research, and theory are complexly intertwined and embedded in a deep historical understanding of institutionalized oppression and the experiences of those who are marginalized, oppressed, and dispossessed (Evans, Kivell, et al., 2014; Fine & Torre, 2021; Freire, 2000; Weis & Fine, 2012). This praxis is also grounded in anti-racism that places racial injustice at the center of our analyses and actions. It requires the practitioner (especially those of us who are white) to be critically reflexive and "articulate how one's own values, assumptions, structural privileges and marginalizations, and life experiences influence one's work, and articulate the strengths and limitations of one's own perspective" (Langhout et al., 2016, p. 2). Unless we accept and make clear our critical, anti-oppressive, activist stance, we're simply tinkering around the edges and contributing to the maintenance of the established order (Johansson & Lindhult, 2008; Lykes & Scheib, 2015).

In the sections that follow, I acknowledge the diversity of contexts and problem settings encountered by community psychologists yet argue that activist community praxis should be grounded in three interdependent critical insights: 1) The structural dynamics of power and privilege that operate within and upon institutions and communities drive the ethical imperative to critique these dynamics and actively engage with others to correct oppressive abuses of power. We should celebrate our discipline's collective commitment to social justice while conceding that we can and should do more to turn our espoused values into critical action. 2) Our practices never occur in a vacuum. The pursuit of social justice is continually compromised by the need to make our practices economically sound and by the dynamic interplay between the community psychology practitioner and the web of governmental and professional institutions, organizations, and funding agencies with their competing priorities, agendas, and values (Dokecki, 1996; Sandler, 2007). Foucault (1984) recognized this tension when he argued that we should reflect on the limits that systems impose on us while we also "experiment with the possibility of going beyond [these limits]" (p, 50). 3) Only through critical reflexivity and a process of continual ethical improvement, in the company of others, can we move beyond these limits and address these contradictions responsibly to engage in ways more consistent with liberatory rather than conservative practices (Case, 2017; Fernández et al., 2021; Langhout et. al., 2016; Smith, 2021; Watkins, 2019; Wilson et al., 2020).

What are we called to do?

Foran (2019) suggests that one way to think of the present moment and the foreseeable future is as a triple global crisis of economics, democracy, and pervasive violence. We see these crises playing out in real time at the global, national, and local levels while we struggle to equitably address and end the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The intersections of these crises are bound together by and intensify the likelihood of climate chaos. We are amidst what James Baldwin (1963) might call "dangerous times" and a "revolutionary situation" bombarded by

the evil triplets of militarism, capitalism, and racism as our fragile democracies are at risk of being stripped and sold for parts (Kendzior, 2018). What are we called to do as community psychologists to be relevant in this current moment and contribute to a more just, equitable, and sustainable society? What do these intersecting crises demand of our community practice? In what ways is our community practice simply propping up the pillars of support for existing power structures? None of us are immune to the effects of white supremacy, colonization, capitalism, anti-Blackness, and patriarchal systems. We must take a hard look at our theories of change, recognize the ways we are complicit with power and privilege, and contribute to "the development of a decolonial community psychology in the service of broader emancipatory socio- and psycho-political praxis" (Fernández et al., 2021, p.3).

> There is a growing urgency around understanding and challenging systems of power stemming from histories of coloniality—the ensuing crises tied to structural violence; Indigenous struggles; racial capitalism; the resurgence of neo-conservatism based on race, alterity, and exploitative hierarchization that occurs with absolute impunity across the globe; and the recalcitrance and elasticity in systems of oppression that we do not always fully grasp through the paradigms of the 20th century demand a more critical, humanizing, and emancipatory psychology. (p.3)

This "politics of urgency" requires "a commitment to changing social conditions *now* by any means necessary" (Hurtado, 2003, p. 222, emphasis in original). As Rappaport (1981) suggested, community psychology is most relevant when fueled with a sense of urgency. "To give up such urgency is to live with mediocrity" (p.8).

Community psychologists do what we do because we desire to contribute to solutions to these intersecting crises. Foundational to CP is a value for social justice and the desire to end oppression (Evans, Rosen, & Nelson, 2014; Kloos et al., 2020; Prilleltensky, 2012; Riemer, et al., 2020; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003). Our shared story is that CP, worldwide, developed to address issues of injustice and oppression and to work towards justice, equality, and wellbeing (Riemer, et al., 2020). What binds us together as a professional society is that we collectively deem injustice unacceptable, and we believe a more just world is possible. Even so, Tejeda et al (2003) might critique our liberal notions of social justice in CP as "hopeful Americanism" and argue that we cannot combat the current crises "simply by pressing the popgun of liberal, middle-class love against the bosom of oppressive social structures" (p. 9).

The urgent crises of today and tomorrow require a serious interrogation of our professional role, theories of change, and chosen strategies and interventions in communities. These intersecting crises require reimagining our practice as activist labor, where our time, energy, and resources are directed at eliminating or minimizing the effects of oppressive social structures and institutions in our society (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020). Our CP practice will not reduce injustice unless we first acknowledge the ways in which we are complicit in the creation of the social structures and institutions that enable it. Our practice must be "grounded in a critical consciousness of this condition and its possible transformation" (Tejeda et al., 2003, p. 5). Dutta (2016) likens the present moment in CP to some of the "very interests that energized Swampscott –cross disciplinary collaboration, pluralistic inquiry, call to social

action - but a reconfiguration of those interests in the context of a decolonizing project" (p. 335). Will we sign on to this project or drift further into irrelevance?

Facing Contradictions

I am a White, cisgender man with a tenured faculty position at a historically White advantaged institution in the United States (U.S.) that sits upon stolen land within the territories of the Miccosukee, Seminole, and Tequesta peoples. Eight contemporary tribal nations are historically tied to the lands that make up the U.S. state known as Florida where my university is located. I have had the privilege of going through most of my life not having to seriously interrogate my whiteness nor the benefits that accrue to me because I am a White man. I took my community psychology (CP) training at another historically White advantaged institution in the southern U.S. Like many CPs of my generation, I learned a version of CP - mostly from other White men - grounded in Western, Eurocentric, and White settler logics and was offered only limited exposure to critical, feminist, liberation, and decolonial perspectives and epistemologies.
I am a university professor with one foot in academia and the other grounded in the local community. The past 15 years for me have involved a good deal of unlearning, problematizing, and "digging up the rottenness" (Fernandez et al., 2021, p. 13) of my training and what I came to believe was "normal" and common sense regarding social science research and community practice. I've been lucky to encounter critical CP friends along the way such as Tod Sloan, Holly Angelique, Rod Watts, Regina Langhout, Paul Duckett, Irma Serrano-Garcia, Isaac Prilleltensky, Geoff Nelson, Dennis Fox, David Fryer, and Chris Sonn to name just a few. I'm benefitting from the more recent work of extraordinary critical scholars in CP and have been compassionately re-educated and further politicized by my students and by adult and youth activists of color in my community here in Miami. I routinely wrestle with the contradiction between my White, middle-class positionality and my proclivity for community-based research and action alongside marginalized groups and their allies. Although I've made many missteps along the way, I like to think I now approach my community-engaged research and action with humility, learning and contributing where I can, while remaining vigilant of my privileged outsider positioning.

Those of us situated in universities with tenured (or relatively stable) positions have a great deal of autonomy and access to resources, spaces, ideas, people, that are available to us by virtue of educational privilege (Daza & Tuck, 2014; Singh et al., 2018). Even with these privileges, we often must balance professional, personal, institutional, and community accountabilities and these are often at odds (Kesten et al., 2017; Perkins, 2010; Sonn, 2004). For example, the emphasis on publishing in peer reviewed academic journals doesn't align with what matters to marginalized communities where we engage. There are inherent contradictions, tensions, and complexities when attempting to engage in activist, anti-oppressive, and anti-racist praxis from a conventional institutional base. In our institutions, disciplines, and organizational fields we are part of what Gramsci (1971) calls the "historic bloc" – a complicated network of relationships, systems, and partnerships that propagates "common sense" understandings that often make us complicit in the promotion of ideologies and practices that maintain societal inequities.

Those working outside the leaky shelter of an academic institution are faced with contradictions and ethical tensions mostly stemming from the need to secure sufficient

income to sustain their livelihoods. Our pursuit of social justice is compromised, made tragicomic, by the fact that our practices are embedded in social-institutional context (Dokecki, 1996). The fact that our pursuit of social justice is compromised makes the terrain thorny, but our community practice risks perpetuating harm when these contradictions exist without any sustained conscious concentration or deliberate pursuit of coherence.

The "Goods" of Community Practice

In *The Tragi-Comic Professional: Basic Considerations for Ethical Reflective-Generative Practice,* Dokecki (1996) draws on the work of MacIntyer (1966; 1981) to describe the tragicomic dual relationship that exists in our community practice that entails a tension between the pursuit of *goods internal* to professional practice (e.g., social justice) and *goods external* to it (e.g., money, recognition, and self-gratification). Our community practice is always a mixed-motive affair. The competition for external goods inevitably penetrates and influences the pursuit of what we believe really matters, creating a tragicomic situation. Dokecki uses the term *tragic* to refer to "the inevitable imperfection of human actors that interferes with attainment of the goods they seek; *comic* to refer to the goods humans can achieve, within limits, if they intend them and exert themselves to achieve them" (p. 13). Under capitalism, we've come to think of ourselves as self-contained economic units maximizing our personal gains and too easily pushing aside contradictions. We need to be honest about how the need to fulfill goods external to our practice constrains our full commitment to challenging injustice. The ethical reflective-generative practitioner is fully conscious of this tension and is engaged in ongoing critical reflexivity and ethical discernment to imagine and unlock possible alternatives that allow them to prioritize actions for equity and justice while still paying the bills. The unethical nonreflective-complicit practitioner focuses on consolidation of their own position, assumptions, and self-serving practices that yield them money and prestige while leaving societal inequities and injustices intact (Cann & DeMeulanaere, 2020).

My Engagement, Power, and Social Action (EPSA) research team frequently wrestles with this contradiction. Our team utilizes action research in solidarity with community partners to understand and expose injustice, build social theory, and promote collective action for social justice. We are based in a university and many doctoral students in our community and counseling psychology programs receive only limited financial support, and often for just the first nine months in the program. The acquisition of research grants and contracts allows me to support students throughout their programs while providing them meaningful, community-engaged research, evaluation, scholar-activist, and consultation experiences. For myself, these grants and contracts may provide a summer salary or funds for equipment, software, and conference travel. And of course, these grants look good on our curriculum vitae and create opportunities for writing, publishing, and career advancement. At times, the team has experienced situations where the allure of a large grant or contract that would provide multi-year resources clouds our judgement and brings forth a form of collective rationalization that threatens our social justice purpose (goods internal) in search of increased financial security and advancement (goods external).

We utilize an informal decision-making process to help us deliberate and do the type of ethical discernment necessary to try to make the "right" decisions about funded project opportunities while acknowledging

the futility in attempting to remain pure and free of contradiction. To align ourselves ethically with community toward the goal of correcting structural injustices, we strive to directly take on these ethical and political contradictions (Kivell et al., 2017). Our decision-making process is designed to make us uncomfortable and challenge us to reckon with larger questions: Is our financial stability, comfort, power, or social rewards more important to us than social justice and racial equity? Does applying for or accepting this financial support make us complicit in upholding and further perpetuating harmful and oppressive social structures? In what ways does our livelihood depend on us not seeing?

Constraints of The Social-Institutional Context

Dokecki (1996) calls this tension between goods internal and external a "ubiquitous tragicomic issue in professional life: Practices of every sort - … - must be economically sound in order to survive, to exist to pursue their internal goods" (p 21). But beyond the inherent contradictions in balancing goods internal (fighting for social justice) and goods external (paying the rent and power bill), we also must be honest about that fact that for most of us, our practices are embedded in a social-intuitional context that values and legitimizes certain types of actions over others. We often come to our community projects "by way of the powers that be" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 29). Beals et al. (2021) make this point with appealing clarity when they assert that "community psychology sits at the intersections of the academic and the nonprofit industrial complex" (p. 9).

> Energy and resources for social change are redirected to bureaucratic structures (topdown, committees, executive boards, etc.) that promote the status quo rather than grassroots structures that challenge dominant norms, structures, and institutions... (p.9)

Nonprofits and the agencies that fund them share certain common features that bolster the status quo due to their structural position. They attempt to avoid politics by empowering well-trained professionals to manage away social problems (Fong & Naschek, 2021). These institutions "systematically white-out the *structural and historic causes of injustice and inequity*" (Fine, 2016, p. 349, emphasis in original) and not only fail to fix injustice but also replicate it within the structures themselves (Spade, 2020). We face a contradiction when we invest our time, energy, and resources endorsing or reproducing dominant beliefs and actions aligned with and benefitting from the academic and nonprofit industrial contexts that have roots in settler colonial logics. For example, I strongly denounce the neo-liberalization of academia while participating in and benefitting from some of the very structures, practices, and processes that feed the neoliberal beast.

Academics like me work in settings that constrain intellectual agency and limit political activity and views unpopular with university administrators, governing boards, and politicians (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Seedat et al., 2001). Our academic training is too often designed to equip us to wield the language, tools, frameworks, and techniques of power in service to conservative agendas (Collins, 2013). When our livelihoods depend on legitimacy within these systems, we may be reluctant to risk our professional prestige and income by rocking the boat too much. Bourdieu's (1980) theory of "habitus" - or socialized norms or dispositions that guide behavior and thinking - accounts for some of the tensions and contradictions that arise in our practice and helps explain how we can resist power and

domination in some contexts and express complicity in others.

Many of us have experienced frustration, discomfort, and value conflicts partnering with funding agencies, service nonprofits, government offices, and community coalitions where problematic framing of problems, lack of structural analysis, and unrealistic theories of change all but guarantee nothing of significance will change. Yet we often stay in the relationships employing various tactics to justify our participation including (unconscious) repression, (subconscious) rationalization, ambivalence, self-deception, (conscious) lying, or attempts at compromise (Berliner et al., 2016).

Operating in this social-institutional context exerts a powerful yet often unexamined influence on our practice. The multifaceted pressures that come with being entangled with these systems mean that it is often easier to ignore or rationalize the ways in which we are complicit and keep doing what is "acceptable" (Rappaport, 1981). Evoking Sarason (1976), this reality demands a critique of the unexamined ways our practice too often aligns with funding agencies and nonprofits that colonize and the ways in which we confuse these opportunities with the social justice needs of communities (see also Trickett, 2015; Trickett & Beehler, 2016). Although writing about decolonization in education specifically, Nina Asher's question is relevant to our understanding of contradictions inherent community psychology practice in this institutionalized context: "How do we break out of recreating, recirculating and transmitting colonizing educational structures and practices when we ourselves are enmeshed in the same" (2009, p. 72–73)? Even as we strive to contribute to the reduction of oppressive hierarchies and inequalities, we are part of institutional structures and systems that reproduce the very injustices we seek to upend (Sandwick et al., 2018).

A Familiar Example?

Over the past decade, the EPSA research team has clearly been guilty of thinking we can contribute to social transformation by aligning ourselves with local funding agencies, powerful nonprofit organizations, and local government offices. Our theory of change has historically rested on the mistaken assumption that transformative social change can be accomplished through these systems. Recently we completed a three-year evaluation of a comprehensive community health initiative in two local communities under a grant funded by a local health foundation. Like many similar efforts in communities, this place-based effort utilized (at least on the surface) a Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2010) approach and brought a range of local stakeholders together around a comprehensive community change agenda with the goal to "produce fundamental community-wide changes that materially improve the long-term health and quality of life of community residents". We had a previous relationship with the foundation and knew many of the organizational partners so it seemed likely that we would be able to wield some influence over the focus of the initiative by employing a collaborative, action research and developmental evaluation approach and acting as critical friends (Evans, 2015; Langhout, 2015) to deepen problem analysis, challenge victim-blaming theories of change, and support ongoing critical learning in action.

Unsurprisingly, this didn't pan out as we envisioned. We were brought on as evaluators after the initiative had already been in motion for three years and the original evaluation team was fired, so we didn't get to play a part in the planning stage.

We should have been tipped off early on to the acritical and apolitical nature of this initiative when we saw that the terms "equity", "disparity", "racism", or "social justice" did not appear in the original request for applications and consequentially did not make it into the two community action plans in any substantive way. We also quickly came to realize that there was no meaningful engagement and leadership by community residents most affected by the very health issues the initiative was seeking to address. The effort was dominated by service providers who, as expected, focused on the lack of, or limited access to services as the main problem and more or different programs and services as the solution. Our efforts to nudge the coalition leaders and participants toward a deeper systemic and structural analysis of the issues and the inclusion and development of "impacted leaders" (brown, 2017) were largely resisted or ignored. Ultimately, we settled into a more traditional role as external evaluators as the initiative chugged along replicating ameliorative programs and services seeking to change Black and Latinx people's health behaviors while continuing to ignore the systemic and structural inequities that drive health disparities (see Benjamins et al., 2021; Williams & Sternthal, 2010).

We will save a full analysis of this project - what went wrong and implications for community practice - for another day. However, the team has done a lot of reflecting and soul-searching about this three-year entanglement that mainly centers around a few questions to help us make smarter decisions about our involvement in future community research and action: (a) should we even have considered taking this on in the first place given the knowledge that this community change effort was primarily a top-down funder-driven initiative? (b) to what degree did our desire for "goods external" cloud our judgement and drive the decision to get involved? (c) in what ways were we guilty of strengthening oppressive structures by our complicity in a project that drew attention away from them? (d) in what ways were we part of the problem by operating under a naïve theory of change that arrogantly assumed we can work alongside funding agencies led by white people and service nonprofits to turn a top-down approach to health promotion into a grassroots transformative solution that centers on the interrogation and elimination of racialized community health disparities? This type of reflection forces us to acknowledge that the things funding agencies (mostly led by white folks) like the one described above care about "are often the things least likely to change the systems of oppression and exploitation that make philanthropy necessary" (Lee, 2021, para 8).

We must embrace the contradictions, consider the consistency or inconsistency of our commitments, and discover what may be productive in them. The richness of activist community praxis comes precisely from forthright engagement with the ethical-political contradictions of our work (Hale, 2008). Martín-Baró (1994) acknowledged that this type of reflection is difficult, yet necessary if we want to avoid being complicit in the promotion of ideologies and practices that maintain societal inequities. His writings challenge us to critically confront the social system our work is embedded within. "The most radical choice" we face he suggested, "concerns the disjunction between an accommodation to a social system that has benefitted us personally and a critical confrontation with that system" (p. 46). It is challenging to figure out how to position ourselves "alongside the *dominated* rather than alongside the *dominator"* (p. 29; emphasis added). How can we utilize our professional competencies, resources, networks, and privilege to work hand in hand with community groups for social justice

rather than social maintenance? We must acknowledge and problematize our existing "dependency relationships" (Sarason, 1976) and complicity with systems of power, and its institutions, and at the same time, work towards accountability to ensure these systems are undone (Fernandez et al., 2021).

Activist Community Praxis

Why *activist* community praxis? We cannot navigate the contradictions described above and remain fully committed to anti-oppression and social justice if we do not understand that our community practice demands of us a clear declaration of where we stand (Freire, 2000). We must be honest about our political commitments. In the spirit of scholar-activism, I suggest that in addition to grounding our community practice in critical and decolonial theorizing we need to embrace our role as social justice activists so that the political and the professional are more closely intertwined. *Activism* refers to actions that challenge existing social and systemic practices rooted in inequity (Arredondo & Perez, 2003). *Social activists* are defined as anyone who acts in a way to create a more equitable world (Jones, 2007; Sloan, 2013). We can enact our activism through active engagements with, and in service of, progressive grassroots social movements (McInerney, 2021; Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009).

Hope, Pender, and Riddick (2019) draw on Curtin and McGarty (2016) to highlight three characteristics that distinguish activists from nonactivists.

> First, activists express sympathy for a cause and are more susceptible to being mobilized to actions that support that cause. Second, political processes and outcomes are salient to activists, which yield a sense of social and political responsibility for a cause (Curtin et al., 2010). Last, activists have a politicized collective identity, and belong to or are allied with oppressed groups who seek to counter policies and practices that disproportionally support privileged groups. (Hope et al., 2019, p. 186).

Taking an activist orientation in our praxis means developing a politicized collective identity and acknowledging that our community practice is unavoidably a political project (Dutta, 2016).

An activist community praxis is a decolonial praxis that stands for the pursuit of justice – racial, economic, gender, sexual, ability, etc. – and is guided by a set of commitments that make it anti-oppressive, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-ableist and against the prison industrial complex and state sponsored violence. It is *praxis* because theory, practice, and reflection are integrated, and one does not precede nor hold greater value than the others (Freire, 2000; Glass, 2001). Theory (including knowledge "rooted in the politics of resistance and liberation"; Cervantes-Soon, 2014, p. 98) is embedded in reflection and action, and action is embedded in reflection and theory. Praxis is "ethical, self-aware, responsive and accountable action, which reflects dimensions of knowing, doing and being" (White, 2007, p. 226). It is critical theorizing and conscious reflection both on and in practice. Praxis is built on a commitment to social justice and recognizes the importance of considering how our actions always get expressed within specific historical, sociocultural, political, and institutional contexts (Freire, 2000; White, 2007).

The activist community psychologist helps to expose, subvert, and challenge social injustices through a combination of activism and praxis. Activist community psychology

praxis is truly counterhegemonic - an everyday politics of resistance and a refusal to be complicit with the systems and structures that create and maintain inequality often in commonplace and practical ways (Christens et al., 2007; Daigle & Ramirez, 2019; Giddens, 1984). It is a "refusal of traditional and dominant forms of normalcy, of neoliberalism, of capitalism, of racism, of patriarchy, of heteronormativity, of happiness, and of oppressive structures in society that limit the imaginations of historically exploited and oppressed people" (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020, p. 99; see also Dutta, 2018). Any community practice inconsistent with an activist stance is what Freire (2000) calls "false generosity" which flows from and dependent on maintaining injustice where true generosity "consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes" of it (p. 45).

How Do We Break Out?

Consistent honest interrogation of the inadequacy or contradictory nature of our actions can risk paralyzing us, yet we must do it anyway. How do we break out of recreating, recirculating, and transmitting colonizing community structures and practices? At the risk of substituting "my thinking for your imagination and self-analysis" (Sarason, 1976, p. 257), I want to finish with some practices that are emerging in my own community research and action in close partnership with students and community partners that may in some small way contribute to our collective imagination regarding activist CP praxis and related competencies. As I offer these last thoughts, I again acknowledge my privileged position and recognize that many of you reading this may not have the luxury to explore some of these approaches due to the level of precarity you experience in your specific practice contexts. I hope to at least spark your imagination.

I want to highlight critical reflexivity, decolonization, becoming co-conspirators and accomplices, and disruption as possible intersecting activist community practices that can be antidotes to some of the limitations and contradictions we face in our community research and action. I agree with Dzidic et al. (2013) that a focus on competencies in CP (Competencies, 2012) can be problematic because of the tendency for them to be acontextual, bureaucratic, and reductionist. Instead of focusing on the development of specific detectable individual competencies, the focus should be on "developing an *orientation* that fosters skill development through a process of reflective learning through action – a way of being, not a way of doing" (Dzidic et al. 2013, p. 6, emphasis in original). For example, through activist community praxis with community partners organizing against anti-Black racism, we can, with sufficient engagement, reflection, and dialogue, gain a critical structural analysis of race, white supremacy, institutional racism, and anti-Blackness (Thomas et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). We can connect our activist community praxis experiences to the literature to gain practical fluency in critical race, Black and Chicana feminist, liberation, postcolonial, and queer theory and better be able to make visible and co-interrogate histories and structures of injustice and resistance (Evans et al., 2016; Fine, 2016; Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Thomas et al., 2020; Weis & Fine, 2012; Wilson et al., 2020). Praxis is the reason for theory and the way through which we test ideas and build practical knowledge with others (Dokecki, 1996; Wicker, 1989).

Ultimately, being "competent" in our praxis is about how we learn in action under conditions of complexity and amidst swirling contradictions. It is honoring the development of practical wisdom and being mindful about how and with whom we apply

our talents and resources and to what ends. Mary Watkins (2019) amplifies Walter Mignolo's calls for "epistemic disobedience" to "disrupt the evangelization of European American approaches" (Watkins, 2019, p. 208). We can tick all the current CP competency boxes and still uphold and legitimize oppressive systems. Are we using our knowledge and process skills for social justice or social maintenance?

Critical Reflexivity

In advancing a politics of national liberation in Mexico, the Zapatistas described their approach as *caminar preguntando* – to walk questioning (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010; Khasnabish, 2008; Watkins, 2019). Critical reflexivity is to walk questioning, closely examining how we are situated in the historical, political, and social context of our community practice and grappling with our own power and privilege (Case, 2017; Dzidic et al. 2013; Fernandez, 2018; Fernandez et al. 2021; Fisher et al. 2007; Langhout, 2016; Langhout et al. 2016; Montero, 2017; Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Sonn & Quayle, 2013). Activist community praxis rests on a foundation of critical reflexivity which involves taking pains to understand one's own positionality with a focus on intersectionality and the effects of this on those with whom one works. A commitment to reflexivity is a partial antidote to naïve relationships that are insufficiently conscious of power differentials and unwittingly reinforce the structures causing suffering. Attention to reflexivity encourages us to problematize our encounters with others and interrogate how we might be benefitting from our privilege at others' expense. (Watkins, 2019, p. 17)

Ethical reflective practice is already well established as an essential competency in CP (Competencies, 2012) yet could be made more critical by including awareness of wider historical, social, political aspects and power relationships of practice contexts. This competency should also engage an affective political lens and challenge us to "make visible our heart-work" (Langhout, 2015, p. 269) welcoming and tapping into our emotions such as righteous anger. Committing to persistent critical reflexivity also provides opportunities for reflective-generative ethical discernment as it relates to the navigating the contradictions mentioned earlier. This commitment allows us to better gauge whose interests and power are at stake in particular community actions while exposing and problematizing our own relationship with dominant forms of structural injustice.

Decolonization

One thing we can commit to as a community of researchers and practitioners (especially those of us who are White) is to lean into the decolonial community psychology project transmitted by our CP colleagues of Color around the world and become humble, response-able learners of decolonial praxis (Dutta, 2018; Dutta et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2021; Torre & Fine, 2021). Decoloniality is not just a different mode of critical thought, it is a standpoint, project, and practice that fuels activist community praxis (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). As community psychologists, we are so wired to find helpful pragmatic solutions and do not adequately commit to a deep understanding of coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. We must pry open our eyes "to the psychological, community, and ecological sequalae of the last five hundred years of colonialism, capitalism, racism, and ongoing neoliberalism" (Watkins, 2019, p. 2). Decolonizing our community practice means openly addressing the pillars of colonialism including white supremacy, racism, sexism, and capitalism (Chaudhuri et al., 2021).

We are rich with an amazing bounty of recent decolonial and critical scholarship in CP that highlights the gaps in our disciplinary thinking and practices and offers compelling antidotes to research, teaching, and action that maintains or is agnostic to structural injustice (e.g. Beals et al., 2021; Dutta, 2016, 2018; Fernández, 2018; Fernández et al., 2021; Dugeon et al., 2020; Langhout, 2015, 2016; Langhout et al., 2016; Lykes et al., 2018; Montero et al., 2017; Silva & The Students for Diversity Now, 2018; Singh et al., 2018; Sonn et al., 2017, to name but a few). We should make ample space for the voices "of community psychologists of Color who are contributing to and transforming the discipline, while forming their own professional identities…" (Fernández, 2018, p. 224) and helping us to question ours.

Becoming Co-conspirators and Accomplices

In our community praxis we must make clear that we are accountable to marginalized, oppressed communities most impacted by structural injustice (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kesten et al., 2017; O'Neill, 1989; Wilson et al., 2020). We can seek out Black led racial justice organizations and coalitions and other community-based social justice groups already working against injustice to build long-term relationships and share our resources while accepting their leadership and lived expertise (Gordon da Cruz, 2017; Steinitz & Mishler, 2009; Thomas et al., 2020). I challenge the naïve illusion (that I've held for too long) that we can work with privileged groups, organizations, coalitions, or funding agencies that do not center impacted leaders and somehow help them find the error of their ways and move toward centering equity and challenging power. Our praxis must move closer to frontline communities who understand the nuances of structural injustice that those of us with more privileged lives do not (Fine & Torre, 2021).

This type of engagement with social justice groups also means going beyond consulting, evaluation, and technical assistance types of contractual relationships to fully demonstrate commitment to the cause. For example, the EPSA team has fully committed to the work of a local, Black-led youth organization. While engaged in a youth participatory action research project with them, we have also joined with them to speak at school board meetings, helped knock on doors and speak with residents during community canvassing campaigns, and served on the planning committee for their annual fundraiser.

One danger that looms in our efforts to accompany and build solidarity with marginalized groups is that we risk becoming part of the "ally industrial complex" (Indigenous Action Media, 2014). Like many well-meaning "helpers" in community settings, our work for social change is connected to our careers and livelihoods. As discussed above, we'll have to navigate these contradictions and find ways to move beyond allyship to become co-conspirators and accomplices through activist community praxis. This means getting more courageous in our praxis and not shying away from being accomplices to the more radical actions of social movement organizations that may make us uncomfortable. For example, we can accompany, amplify, and support with our resources, community organizing and direct-action efforts for police-free schools and defunding of police, prison abolition, land reform, mutual aid, worker cooperatives, housing justice and tenant rights, transformative justice, disability justice, reproductive justice, economic justice, and community control of municipal budgets. We need to stop being complicit in propagating community interventions designed by academic elites and nonprofit gatekeepers that do not directly target racist and unjust policies and systems.

Disruption

One tactic of activist community praxis is disruption. Evans (2015) suggests that playing the role of critical friend is one way to problematize and disrupt ameliorative thinking and action in community settings. For Bond (1999), disruption involves "making visible the perspectives and experiences of those who have been kept at the margins... labeling privilege and challenging values and assumptions" (p. 350). But disruption can also mean directly exposing and challenging abuses of power and subverting and redistributing structural power in the settings where we have influence. Singh et al. (2018) describe how those of us in academic settings can "exercise our epistemic power to train future scholars committed to dismantling structures that benefit from the oppression of marginalized communities" (p. 386). Disruption occurs anytime power is questioned, and the struggles of oppressed people are made primary (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020). We can wield all available institutional power we have to detach from white hegemonic positivist transactional ways of practicing (Tuck & Yang, 2014) and disrupt imbalances of power "while remaining especially vigilant toward the destructive allure of the elitism and hierarchy that surround us" (Hale, 2008, p. 18).

Mary Watkins (2019) highlighted the work of critical anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992, 1995) and the role we can play as "negative workers" - "a species of class traitor -… - who colludes with the powerless to identify their needs against the interests of the bourgeois institution" (Watkins, 2015, p. 209). As negative workers, we can disrupt, refuse, and resist in in ways that create cracks in mainstream institutions and systems that allow for opportunities to address power differentials and harmful policies. For example, we can make part of our activist community praxis exposing the complicity of the academic and non-profit industrial complex in perpetuating social and economic injustice. In addition to overt actions to disrupt, refuse, and resist, Tuck and Yang (2011) highlight the ways in which we can also engage in covert everyday acts of resistance that test and erode power that "might include sabotage, feigned ignorance, false compliance, foot dragging, and theft" (Scott, 1985, as cited in Tuck & Yang, 2011, p. 524).

Conclusion: Seeking Emancipatory Relevance

Borrowing from Thomas Teo's (2009) scholarship in critical psychology, I believe our community practice should be judged by its *emancipatory relevance* – the degree to which we are contributing to the collective effort to resist and overthrow oppressive social conditions. We must be relevant to struggles for equality and social justice or risk sustaining injustice. I acknowledge that these ideas for an activist community praxis are more tidily articulated here than most of us experience in the real-world locations of our engaged research and action "where we are challenged to deal with the complexities, contradictions, and binaries…" (Suffla et al., 2015, p. 14). These tensions and contradictions are not easily navigated, yet we must recognize and mine the radical possibilities inhabiting this "not-yet" space in the constant process of becoming in an ever-unfinished process of solidarity (Bloch, 1995; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Engaging with radical imagination allows us to then return to the present to shake up our thinking and help us remember how things could be radically different (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010; Sarason, 1976).

In the end, the power of our activist community praxis to affect change "depends on the dosage of its break with the dominant

culture" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 37). The dominant culture of capitalism and neoliberalism, of our disciplines, and of our social-institutional contexts exerts a powerful influence on how we choose to act in the world for social justice. Each of us inevitably falls short of consistently living the values and politics we commit to. This is the tragic nature of our praxis. And yet, might we be willing to recognize the ways in which we are complicit in the maintenance of structural injustice and begin to imagine ways we can practice differently?

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