



The COVID-19 Crisis: Using the Cracks in Neoliberalism for Social Transformation Towards a More Just Society

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University. Her research interests center on developing models of youth-adult partnerships in secondary schools, fostering youth engagement in social justice, and envisioning alternatives to compulsory sexuality. She seeks to ground her work in meaningful, community-based applications, as well as use her research to center youth voice. Outside of academia, Sarah enjoys bubble tea, crafting, taking way too many photos of her pets, and tending to her ever-expanding plant collection. *Kai Reimer-Watts*, is a current PhD student in Community Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University; holds a Masters of Climate Change; and is director of the feature documentary for climate action *Beyond Crisis*, “a story of hope for a rapidly changing world”. Kai’s research and creative work explores the rich intersections of climate storytelling, the visual arts and grassroots activism, centering on the powerful role of ‘signposts’ in both unifying and mobilizing a collective response to the climate crisis. In partnership with the lead mural artist and many others, Kai was the student lead on the “Climate is Life” mural project and visual ‘signpost’ on Laurier’s Waterloo campus, installed in Fall 2019. He is a research fellow with the VERiS Research Centre in Waterloo, Ontario, exploring how to support emergent cultures of sustainability, and an active member of several climate justice groups including 50by30 Waterloo Region – a grassroots group that in 2021 advocated successfully for Waterloo Region and all seven area municipalities to adopt a 50% greenhouse gas emissions reduction target by 2030, in line with climate science. Taken together, Kai’s work explores the power of collective imagination and social organizing in response to crisis to forge a far brighter future. *Rajni Sharma* (she/her), Canadian-born South Asian cis-female living in traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishnaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples. Her PhD research focuses on ways of transforming the psychotherapy practice for racialized communities. Specifically, how therapy can address experiences of racial trauma and ways in which processing and healing can occur. She is also a practicing Art Therapist and Psychotherapist. Her passion and work are centered around creating healing spaces where people can feel supported and not alone in their mental health journey. Rajni has worked with a range of diverse clients and communities in clinical and community spaces. She takes a critical and intersectional position to her clinical work and research and believes that many mental health challenges are connected to larger-systems and structural realities that can lead to racism and oppression.

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Abstract

Within the current COVID-19 pandemic, cracks observed in neoliberal dominant global economic paradigms reveal how austerity policies have crippled crucial social safety nets, such as health care, with capitalism continuing to adversely impact our climate with ad infinitum extraction of resources for overconsumption. In examining these associations, this collaborative paper critically applies social theories to explore ideas and approaches to creating transformative social change, in an effort to move towards a more just and sustainable society in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and other ongoing systemic crises. The paper presents the pandemic as a social crisis and explores theories of social justice and how they might be applied within the context of neoliberal capitalism, also known as neoliberalism. The authors of this paper argue that to move towards a just society, social transformation is needed, informed by the theories of decoloniality and intersectionality. A conceptual model is presented that demonstrates how these theories can be woven together to inform community psychology action and research, addressing COVID-19 specifically. Possibilities for transformation in the areas of mental health and climate justice are also presented. Finally, recommendations for community psychology researchers seeking social transformation, while navigating this challenging and complex new reality, are shared.

Preamble

In understanding that the First Peoples of these lands hold the essence of the ontological knowledge to disrupt the colonial project that is the settler nation-state of Canada, we envision a society that collectively cares for all, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized². We envision the upholding of human rights and community wellbeing over and above our economies – a society grounded in equity, diversity, and inclusion, where everyone has a fair opportunity for a meaningful, respected, and engaging life, free of oppression and discrimination. We envision a society where all are valued and

celebrated, while breaking the toxic ideologies that wrongfully equate human value with financial worth.

We envision a society that respects Mother Earth and all her living and nonliving beings – all our Relatives, striving to sustain our interconnected world. We envision a society that empowers all, with self-determination and access to support – not just to survive but to thrive – discarding the harmful politics of neoliberal capitalism, known as neoliberalism, competition and hyper-individualism. We acknowledge that a more just society is not static, but rather a continual process of navigation towards

² Marginalized populations include those who “experience discrimination and exclusion (social, political and economic) because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social and cultural dimensions” (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, n.d.). Marginalized populations include members of the following groups: Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), Peoples of African descent in the diaspora, racialized persons, nondominant cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities, immigrants and newcomers, youth, 2SLGBTQ+ persons, the poor, the mentally ill, low-income workers, women, the elderly, the underhoused, people with disabilities, migrant communities, the current or formerly incarcerated, and persons who are under or unemployed.

deeper equity and justice in which we are all engaged.

Introduction

In this paper, we, as graduate students learning to critically understand our world, created a conceptual model to assist in discerning how the theoretical perspectives of decoloniality and intersectionality might explain and help us respond to the cracks now revealed in neoliberalism, and what actions we can take in moving toward a more just and equitable society. We needed to do this work, as the concept of 'crisis' implies an overwhelming, complex problem unimaginable in scope, potentially demoralizing and limiting a society's collective imagination of what can be possible in the face of an immediate threat (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). We did not want to feel inertia within a sense of doom in realizing that Canada is currently embedded in multiple such crises, including a pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus infection, known as COVID-19, and the global climate crisis. Where austerity measures were once justified as a means to address economic crises (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014), there is now a lack of adequate social welfare, resource equity, and an ever-widening wealth gap, which are contributing to the predicted healthcare and economic collapses (Crawley, 2020; Kirby, 2020). At the same time, we are witnessing communities coming together to support each other in incredible, life-affirming ways, such as in the case of online mutual-aid groups (Moscrop, 2020) and community care. These examples of compassionate responses have led us to wonder how we can contribute, as student researchers, to addressing situations created in this pandemic, with eyes turned toward empathy and justice.

With these goals in mind, our paper explores how we can critically apply social theories to move towards a more just society in the

context of the current COVID-19 pandemic. We focus our efforts on the settler nation-state of Canada, while recognizing that other societies around the world are also suffering from the impacts of this pandemic and the dominant neoliberal response. After discussing our social positions as researchers, we set the context by sharing what we know about the pandemic, discussing its connections to neoliberalism, and exploring what a more just society could look like. We argue that to move towards a more just society, we need critical social transformation informed by the theories of decoloniality and intersectionality. Integrating current literature from critical theorists and scholar-activists, we present a conceptual model that provides a visual demonstration of how these theories interact and can be woven together to inform community psychology (CP) action and research addressing COVID-19. Acting like a map, we intend for the conceptual model to provide a coherent representation of our inquiry and arguments, as well as provide a visual guide for the change process (Shields & Tajalli, 2006). The model was developed over several discussions amongst the authors and was approved after several redesigns and faculty feedback to ensure it captured our collective ideas regarding theory interaction, action points, and opportunities. Grounding our model in concrete examples based on the work of some of the authors of this paper and others who base their work in decolonial and intersectional theoretical perspectives, we discuss possibilities for transformation in the areas of mental health and climate justice. Finally, as all the authors are doctoral students in CP, we conclude with recommendations for CP researchers seeking social transformation while navigating challenging and complex new realities. We start with the important consideration of who we are and why we have come together in this writing.

Our Social Position as Researchers

Influenced by Black feminist thought regarding epistemological underpinnings of how we contemplate social, political, and economic systems in relation to academia and Eurocentric thinking (Crenshaw, 1989; Simien, 2004), we share who we are as we navigate this world within many truths.

We are six PhD students in Ontario, Canada in Wilfrid Laurier University's (WLU) Community Psychology program, a critical, applied social science program that promotes social justice and community-participatory research. Coming from diverse backgrounds and experiences, we acknowledge our multiple and intersecting social identities with respect to Indigeneity, race, gender, age, sexuality, and class. We share different positions on this land with respect to Indigenous, settler, and immigration status. As activists, researchers, and front-line service providers, our research and community work are varied, focusing on issues concerning Black, Indigenous and Racialized (BIR) communities, climate justice, mental health, and education. These experiences shape our understanding of the pandemic's impact on people's lives and how we can best move toward a more just society.

Setting the Context

The Pandemic

The world is in the midst of the inequitable COVID-19 pandemic that, to date, has shown very clearly how countries that promote neoliberal, global capitalist agendas of profit over people have benefited a select few (e.g., political and corporate elites), while harming many (McCloskey, 2020; Navarro, 2020). As noted by Jean Shaoul of *wsws.org*, in September 2021,

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues its upward trend across the globe, vaccine inequality grows ever more grotesque. Of the world's 195 countries, just 10 rich countries account for most of the 5.86 billion vaccine doses administered so far. To put this in perspective, this is enough to fully vaccinate 2.8 billion of the world's 7.8 billion population or 50 percent of those over 15 years of age. Instead, only 31.5 percent of the world's population have been fully vaccinated against the disease. (para. 1-2). At the time of this writing (September 22, 2021), worldwide, 4,712,557 people have died from SARS-CoV-2 virus infections, with 229,770,555 confirmed cases. Canada accounts for 1,594,000 of these cases, with 27,547 deaths³ (Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE), 2021).

The effects of this pandemic have worsened existing social and economic injustices, putting more vulnerable populations at heightened health and economic risk (Alliance for Healthier Communities, 2020; Morin, 2020; Timothy, 2020; Wyton, 2020). For example, the unhoused population in Canada is more vulnerable to this outbreak, due to underlying health conditions and the frequent inability to follow key strategies for prevention, such as regular handwashing (Bains, 2020). Exacerbating this, for the past 18 months, spaces which typically provide shelter, such as libraries, community centres, public washrooms, warming centres, and drop-in sites, have been closed (Bains, 2020). Furthermore, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, First Nations Peoples on reserves were already exposed to higher rates of infectious diseases, which are linked to housing infrastructure issues, which is linked to inadequate water systems (Thompson et

³ Up-to-date numbers are provided daily by John Hopkins University at:

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bd7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

al., 2020). Another disproportionately impacted population is school-aged children affected by school closures, especially children in low-income settings (Editorial, 2020) and marginalized communities lacking adequate resources at home to support their learning (Alphonso, 2020). Reports of violence, including domestic violence and child abuse, are rising during the pandemic (Amin, 2020; Campbell, 2020; Miller, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020), further impacting the health and wellbeing of children isolated at home (Slaughter, 2020). It is critical that the shock from the pandemic does not deepen inequalities, but is instead used as an opportunity to build a more just society.

Shock and Opportunity

Shock events, as described by Klein (2007) in *The Shock Doctrine*, are large-scale, disruptive impacts on society that produce a state of collective disorientation or shock – such as acts of war, terror attacks, natural disasters, financial crises, or a global pandemic. Historically, systems of domination and power such as neoliberalism and colonization (Liboro, 2015) have taken advantage of shock events to increase profits for a select few, while exacerbating existing wealth gaps and social inequalities (Lewis et al., 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic is a shock event for the world, and there is a substantial risk that this pattern of exploitation is happening again. The danger of exploitation by power elites in a time of shock underscores the importance of CP practitioners in working effectively with communities in a targeted pushback to ensure a more just response. Instead of seeing shock events as leading inevitably to deepening exploitation, we believe these events, through revealing the harms of the current neoliberal economic system, can provide an opening for change towards a newly imagined just society.

According to Cameron (2011), “the focus for envisaging a just society needs to be on expanding the social economy and building a new economy, not shoring up capitalism through fiscal policy, or trying to rescue an unjust society through better social policy” (p. 1). The Center for Economic and Social Rights (n.d.) also notes that we need “... to envision a rights-based economy and catalyze action towards it – taking into account the confluence of political, economic, climate, and health crises we now face” (para. 2). The COVID-19 pandemic offers a rare opportunity to ‘reset’ the course of society, choosing a path towards justice, sustainability, and human betterment. History contains many examples of strategic planning post-disaster, such as welfare programs, healthcare, education support, housing, and unemployment insurance to many (Harrison, 2020). As billions of dollars in public and private financing are spent, it is critical that these funds are used to dismantle the injustices and harms of the current neoliberal system that creates such crises, building instead towards a more just society that puts people and planet first.

Neoliberalism

Since its inception in the 1950s, neoliberalism has gone from a fringe economic theory to the dominant global economic paradigm today (Lewis et al., 2009; Stanford, 2014). As both a political ideology and economic policy framework, neoliberalism is designed to promote the free market, and has promoted “deregulation, globalization, open markets, free trade, the removal of licence [sic] and quota systems, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision, as solutions to the challenges created or faced by capitalism” (Liboro, 2015, pp. 211-212). Since the mid-1980s, neoliberalism has become widely adopted as the dominant economic ideology by numerous western societies, including the United States (US), United Kingdom, and Canada (Stanford,

2014). This ideology has profound implications for how societies perceive themselves and the world, and as a guiding framework for economic policy, it has had massive negative impacts by encouraging the accelerated plundering of Mother Earth's resources and increased exploitation of already marginalized people, greatly contributing to the climate, ecological, and social emergencies faced today (Monbiot, 2020). The impacts of neoliberalism are severe and include weakening policies that protect workers and consumers, the privatization of public services, and funding cuts to medical and public health services that detrimentally affect the welfare and quality of life of large populations (Navarro, 2020). Also, by over-emphasizing the role of the private sector while reducing the role of the state, neoliberalism limits the ability of governments to respond effectively to social challenges. One example of this is the challenge of providing sufficient, affordable, dignified housing for those who need it, as federal funding for affordable housing has been reduced or eliminated under many neoliberal regimes since the 1980s, including Canada (Nelson, 2013). By reducing state responsibility for delivering much-needed public services, neoliberalism greatly constrains the state's ability to center the wellbeing of people both during 'normal' times, and when disasters strike. Instead, neoliberal societies promote oversized corporations tasked with delivering these services that are suddenly "too big to fail... vital services cannot be allowed to collapse [so] the state must intervene to support them when disaster threatens. Business takes the profits, the state keeps the risk" (Monbiot, 2020, p. 38), which then "stops governments from changing social outcomes and delivering social justice" (p. 39). According to Monbiot (2020), neoliberalism also results in a politics of disenfranchisement, where the political system and the ideology it embodies become more and more distant from people's lives –

often producing reactionary and destabilizing anti-politic mindsets.

Given this context, what happens when a global health pandemic and climate crisis hit neoliberal societies that have dramatically reduced the roles of government and social support needed to protect its people, particularly the most vulnerable? As demonstrated above, such situations are playing out in real time, with marginalized populations experiencing heightened health and economic risks. A system that routinely puts private profits above human and environmental welfare makes many communities far more vulnerable to additional stressors and impacts (Monbiot, 2020). With many policies designed to privilege the already extremely wealthy (Harris, 2019; Nelson, 2013), neoliberalism is clearly the antithesis of the system needed to build a more just society; however, it is nevertheless looked to in times of crises by many western countries, including Canada, for policy framing and guidance (Climenhaga, 2020; Maitra, 2020). The harmful ideology of neoliberalism must clearly be challenged, as it currently places a massive restriction on society's broader political and social imagination, leaving us ill-prepared to imagine and fight for the much-needed alternative systems and values that could result in a far more just, sustainable future (Foster, 2015).

As neoliberalism has played a clear role in increasing inequities across society, disenfranchising ever-more people from the political system, it is clear we urgently need counter-ideas and counter-paradigms to challenge and help replace the dominance of neoliberal ideology, centering justice. In that vein, we bring forth two critical social theories that can aid in this movement toward a more sustainable and just society: decoloniality and intersectionality. We emphasize these theories as being essential yet overlooked tools in the interlinked

struggles for social justice and liberation. We reference tenets of these critical social theories and present them as key pillars for our conceptual model (page 19), starting with decoloniality then followed by intersectionality.

Decoloniality

Coloniality is the continuation of colonial forms of power and oppression that were and are produced by colonial structures (Grosfoguel, 2007). It is critical to understand how coloniality impacts decisions, policies, rules, and laws; how coloniality affects those most marginalized; and how moving towards decoloniality can disrupt facets of coloniality (Adams et al., 2017). According to Maldonado-Torres (2016), decoloniality “is a direct challenge to the temporal, spatial, and subjective axis of the modern/colonial world and its institutions, including the university and the state” (p. 4). Decoloniality aims to delink colonial relations related to knowledge production and framing of identity, while leaning on the collective and historical memory of people impacted by coloniality (Carolissen & Duckett, 2018; Mignolo & Hoffman, 2017), to move towards epistemic reconstitution (Mignolo & Hoffman, 2017). As an example, a practice of decolonial pedagogy is to ‘problematize’ situations rather than pathologize individuals (Reyes, 2019). As described by Reyes (2019), “problematizing situations systematically moves beyond surface-level observations in order to uncover and understand the root problems that caused the situation in the first place” (pp. 6-7). The practice of problematizing includes “listening, asking questions, and drawing connections to the broader implications of systems of oppression” (Reyes, 2019, p. 7). Similarly, decoloniality should be a process of “re,” as shared by Reyes (2019), “resisting, refusing, rehumanizing, remembering, reminding, restoring, reframing, revisioning, and reimagining” (p. 7).

Further, Adams et al. (2017) described the “denaturalization” approach, which emphasizes that decolonization must be interrogated while working towards local and broader liberation. More specifically, the denaturalization perspective challenges the “coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 7), and confronts epistemic violence, manifested as dehumanization and racialized essentialism (Held, 2020) that originates from and operates in spaces of power (Adams et al., 2017). Thus, denaturalization confronts the oppressor and disrupts spaces of power that hold problematic Eurocentric views that reinforce violence and oppression. It is critical that colonial spaces are disrupted to allow for a push towards a reimagined society; as this happens, the voices and experiences of those most impacted by neoliberalism in these unparalleled times of COVID-19 need to be centered, which can be achieved by applying an intersectional approach.

Intersectionality

As a critical social theory, intersectionality is a tool for understanding the experiences of those affected by different systems of power as well as informing social action (Hill Collins, 2019). Using an intersectional lens, we are interested in understanding how systems of power impact those with multiple axes of systemic social burden (e.g., race, gender, class) and how social action can be catalyzed to support justice and wellbeing. In a landmark paper on intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989) argued that the identities and experiences of marginalized groups cannot be parsed out or limited to a single issue, nor can some identities be privileged to the exclusion of others. Instead, the experiences of multiple identities of marginalization should be seen as intimately connected and woven together as a whole (Crenshaw, 1989). We posit that since crises within neoliberal contexts worsen and

further widen the inequalities between those in power and those in need (Nelson, 2013), those at the intersections of systemic oppressions are disproportionately impacted by this pandemic, the climate crisis, and other shocks.

The implications of decoloniality and intersectionality approaches urge us to focus our attention on the needs and experiences of the most vulnerable groups impacted by COVID-19 in multiple and intersecting ways. For example, an intersectional approach highlights the mental health challenges of essential workers, often Black and racialized women, who are working in high-risk, low-wage positions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Damian et al., 2021). Intersectionality also highlights how systemically oppressed identities and the discrimination related to these identities interact with each other. For example, Black men in the US may face a disproportionate risk of contracting COVID-19 because they are overrepresented in the prison system, due to systemic anti-Black racism (Macmadu et al., 2020; Rushovich et al., 2021). Black women, on the other hand, are at disproportionate risk of contracting COVID-19 because they are overrepresented in public-facing jobs that place them at increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 (Rushovich et al., 2021). Through an intersectional lens, CP practitioners can take action to address and mitigate the impacts of the crisis on those most marginalized.

The decoloniality and intersectionality theories are integrated within our conceptual model (page 19) that shows how cracks in the walls of neoliberalism are being actively expanded and opened by the COVID-19 crisis, with effort potentially allowing justice-based social transformation to flow through. If we wish to work toward a more sustainable, just society, applying both decoloniality and intersectionality approaches to the urgent crises western societies currently face can be

helpful in pushing back against the harmful ideology of neoliberalism. In this time of COVID-19, we require steps that build toward justice for all, while also pushing back and moving away from the current oppressive contexts in which we find ourselves. We turn to this next.

Towards a Just Society

In our view, our current western society is unjust, as it does not provide equitable freedoms, justices, opportunities, and support to all members of the nation-state; elements that Prilleltensky (2012) argues are critical for our individual wellbeing and ability to thrive. In this section, we briefly review the social justice theories of political philosopher John Rawls, economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, and community psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky, which led us to a reimagined vision of a just society.

Theories of justice

John Rawls' (1971) well-known and prominent theory of justice envisions a society where free and equal people work cooperatively to benefit both themselves and the greater good (Johnston, 2011; Rawls, 1971). Rawls proposes, that due to political, social, and economic institutions privileging some members of society over others, that the institutions resultantly cause major inequalities, even in a "just society." However, according to Rawls (1971), "inequalities that do not benefit all members of society are considered unjust" (p. 175).

Equally influential, Amartya Sen's (2011) theory of justice focuses on social justice and what Sen referred to as capabilities. Sen argues against the idea that economic growth equates to a better life for all, as economic growth theorizing fails to explain how and why some people are deprived in economic positioning (Nussbaum, 2003). Sen's perspective addresses the concept of equity,

by recognizing that individuals require differing levels of resources and have differing abilities in reaching similar capacities of economic and social functioning (Nussbaum, 2003). The capabilities approach considers those most vulnerable in our societies and works to integrate the values of respect, dignity, and self-competence into ideas for a just society. However, Munger et al. (2016) notes that the capabilities approach “says little about working to address social injustices in communities” (p. 178), or offering opportunities for community psychologists to inform and create justice-based interventions that are more transformative.

Building on Sen’s ideas, Prilleltensky (2012) turns our focus to community and defines two main types of justice: distributive and procedural. Distributive justice is the equitable allocation of burdens, privileges, rights, and responsibilities. However, we ask, how does society determine what each person is due, especially in the context of historical injustices and current systemic oppressions? Merit and need are two potential criteria for considering the distribution of resources (Prilleltensky, 2012). If justice were based on merit, people would get what they deserve based on their capability and effort. On the other hand, if justice were based on need, people would get what they need to survive and prosper, an idea which is most compatible with Sen’s theory.

Procedural justice is defined as having fair, informative, and respectful participatory decision-making processes at all levels of society, which supports the idea that social systems (i.e., education, judicial, housing) should treat all people fairly and equitably. Of course, this is not currently the case, as many people are excluded from, harmed by, and underserved by social systems intended to

support them (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). This highlights the need for greater dignity, respect, communication, fairness, accountability, and responsibility as the seeds for justice within us, our relationships, and our communities (Prilleltensky, 2012). Surely, a society that is based on and values all forms of justice would include these essential elements.

Building on the theories of decoloniality and intersectionality, we conceive of a just society as representing what Cameron (2011) refers to as a “legitimate aspiration for human betterment” (p. 1). Specifically, we agree with Rawls (1971) that the advantages gained in a just society must be to the greatest benefit of its least advantaged, most vulnerable members. Marginalized populations are the most disadvantaged in our society today, and so our conception of a just society places these populations and their needs at the center. Our conceptual model that builds on the principles of our presented theories is now discussed and visually presented.

Our Conceptual Model

In this paper, we seek to challenge neoliberal ideology with the intention of moving towards social transformation and a more just society, in facing the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disruption, and other crises. Moreover, we want to challenge traditional community psychology and push the field towards more critical, transformative practices, centering justice and equity for all. In theorizing the conceptual model, we realized our own conscientization⁴ (Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1996; Martín-Baró, 1994) in understanding our truths in reflection, theory, and then in action. Fanon (1963) and Tuhiwai Smith (2012) remind us that imperialist oppression is still part-and-parcel of a colonial existence for Indigenous, Black, and Racialized Peoples and

⁴ We are extremely grateful to our professors who exposed us to scholars, community members, and activists who are our

teachers in myriad ways and who promote critical praxis as learning.

communities in the settler nation-state of Canada. As part of conscientization, and guided by the education of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Sean Wilson (2008), we have undergone transformation in epistemological ways of knowing, in asking, “Whose knowledge counts?” As students, will those more in authority and esteem respectfully accept and use our knowledges, based on our lived experiences and ways of knowing and being? As a cohort, we have come together in dialogue and understanding, knowing that we co-create knowledge when our stories are shared in respect, reciprocity, and trust (Freire, 1996; Wilson, 2008). As Indigenous storyteller Shawn Wilson (2008) says, “... it is important for storytellers to impart their own life and experience into the telling” (p. 32). Thus, when coming together to understand neoliberalism and its impact within intersectionality and decoloniality theorizing, we cannot neglect our social locations and those of our communities in transformational

praxis, as we work to move to a more just society.

In our theorizing, we proposed a conceptual model that supports social transformation, guided by our vision for a just society that incorporates decoloniality and intersectionality approaches. Intersectionality pushes for a holistic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to address the interwoven experiences of those with multiple identities of systemic marginalization, while decoloniality requires that any transformation includes an intentional effort to center Indigenous knowledges and experiences, and to combat the power that coloniality lends to neoliberalism. We hope that this conceptual model promotes critical reflections to ensure that CP practitioners and researchers do not unintentionally uphold oppressive structures of power in our work.

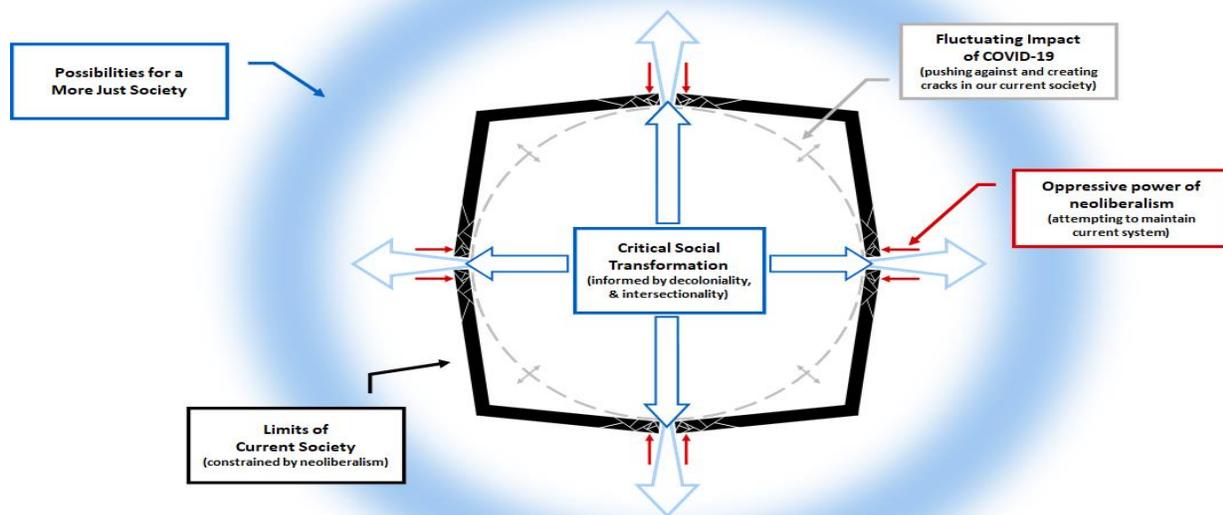


Figure 1. The Conceptual Model

Note. The Conceptual Model illustrates how the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed cracks in neoliberal ideology, potentially allowing critical justice-based social transformation, informed by the critical theories of decoloniality and intersectionality, to break through in reimagining and moving towards a more just western societies.

Presenting the Conceptual Model

We view our current Canadian society as defined and bounded by neoliberalism. While our capacity as authors to imagine possibilities for a more just society extends beyond this scope, we acknowledge that many actions for change are still limited within the confines of neoliberal ideology. However, compounded by pre-existing crises such as increasing social inequities and the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has strained the highly limited neoliberal worldview, pushing it apart at the seams. For some, understanding the oppressive nature and deeply harmful failings of neoliberalism is not new; nonetheless, the ongoing struggle of federal, provincial, and municipal governments and the private sector to cope effectively with the COVID-19 crisis is revealed to far more people today, through the negative impacts that neoliberalism has wrought. Conversations about neoliberal failures in the face of the pandemic can promote a large-scale critical consciousness-raising process, and foster reimaginings towards collective visions of a more just society. However, neoliberal capitalism has proven time and time again to be extremely adaptable in the face of crises (Mavelli, 2017; Schmidt & Thatcher, 2013), leading us to believe that it will actively try to maintain its current oppressive status quo.

To build a more just society, in response to neoliberalism and the current pandemic, we need a multidimensional, transformative strategy. Most importantly, we propose that this type of transformation must be informed by decoloniality and intersectionality. These two theories provide critical lenses to better understand structural injustice; inform processes of reimagining just societies; and

develop value-driven, equitable processes for community organization efforts.

Connections to the Conceptual Model

Our conceptual model (Figure 1) illustrates how the COVID-19 crisis can be a vector for massive upheavals in traditional neoliberal practices. When faced with crises, social movements often become locked into reactive responses that risk being short-lived, necessitating proactive conversations for more long-term strategic action (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). The conceptual model illustrates how to use theory to strategically understand and catalyze sustainable change towards a more just society. We also recognize that neoliberalism is deeply linked to colonialism. By prioritizing the needs of global markets over the wellbeing of Mother Earth, neoliberalism supports ongoing colonialism, the exploitation of labour, and the dispossession of vulnerable communities (Liboro, 2015). Further, intentional colonial harm of Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized communities for economic gain has left a society dominated by a rhetoric of violence, profit, and systemic oppression (Fanon, 1963; Liboro, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012), with few examples of alternative and just social structures. As such, any potential social action must consider the intersectionality of these disenfranchised experiences.

To be able to collectively imagine possibilities for a more just society, we need to engage the radical imagination of people (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). Using radical imagination in change efforts focuses collective narratives around just societies and provides an end goal for social transformation. As Meadows (1997) argues, changing the mindset or paradigm out of which a system arises is the most effective point of leverage for changing a

system; radical imagination is hence one useful tool to help catalyze such paradigm shifts (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). The following illustrate how the praxis of radical imagination can be applied in a community context.

One example of radical imagination is the cocreation of a new collective symbol for climate justice on WLU's Waterloo campus in Fall 2019 (WLU, 2019). This mural was created through a participatory process led by community mural artist Pamela Rojas and proposed by Laurier PhD student and article co-author (Kai Reimer-Watts). A diverse mural planning committee was convened to help guide the mural creation process, and to consult with community leaders and institutional decision-makers to inform the mural's final design and placement. Aligned with Global Climate Strike Week (350.org, 2019), the final cocreation of the mural involved several hundred WLU students, staff, faculty, and community members contributing to painting it together over a 10-day period. Now finished, the Climate is Life mural sends a clear, enduring message on the value of Mother Earth's life-giving climate systems, while centering social justice, by honouring the diverse intergenerational social movements rising to confront the climate crisis, led by frontline Indigenous and racialized communities. The mural's prominent public placement at the heart of campus allows it to continue to share this message with many thousands of people and provide a gathering place for local climate activism.



Figure 2. The Climate is Life Mural, Wilfrid Laurier University (2018-2019)

Note. Painted by artist Pamela Rojas with the support of several hundred volunteers.

As a powerful symbol, the Climate is Life mural has inspired other climate justice-related initiatives, including a new research action group, Climate Justice Laurier or CJL (Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group, n.d.), and the start of a food justice garden around the mural and throughout the heart of the Waterloo campus and surrounding communities. This food justice garden, managed by volunteers through CJL, donates produce grown to food insecure students, within an Indigenous worldview of stewardship and protection of the land. Planted in front of the mural itself is a garden including the beneficial companion planting of Ahsen Nikontate'ken:a – Onon'onhsera, O'saheta, O'nenste (The Three Sisters – squash, beans, corn), that are central to Haudenosaunee food growing practices and cosmology (Delormier et al., 2017). In this way, the Climate is Life mural and CJL food justice garden have both played a role in reclaiming institutional colonized space, engaging collective radical imagination through both a decolonial and intersectional lens to disrupt dominant narratives and envision a more just society with a safe climate future.

As we are learning and transforming within ourselves, one way to engage radical imagination is through critical consciousness-

raising in our communities, which involves individuals in our communities recognizing the systemic structures of oppression and their own importance and engagement in social change (Freire, 1996). Consequently, as we work with and in our communities, we promote critical consciousness-raising by including, as part of our work, perceptions of power and systems of power, providing insights into systemic oppression which, within the work, promotes active citizen participation (such as participatory action research) (Kivell, 2018; Nelson et al., 2014; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

Moreover, raising critical consciousness occurs by contrasting a group's situation with alternatives existing for other groups in that same society (Montero, 2007), a process mimicked when fostering radical imagination. In Canada, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent neoliberal shock response have confirmed that disparities between class, race, gender, ableism, age, etc. are glaringly apparent. We believe that critical consciousness-raising, through community dialogue and storytelling, is a key component needed to interrogate the cracks revealed in our neoliberal society from the pandemic shock. As an example, the Proclaiming Our Roots (POR) project raises Afro-Indigenous critical consciousness by resisting colonial narratives of who belongs on these lands, and the restoring of the histories, geographies, and experiences of mixed-blood Black and Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island (Beals & Wilson, 2020). Within intersectionality and decoloniality theoretical perspectives, POR fills a gap in historical erasure of Indigenous-Black communities in settler Canada and raises the voices of those oppressed by the nation-state and colonial-minded lateral violence. Community members who take part in and contribute to the POR project are shredding the complicit silence, as they teach and learn and share knowledge and wisdom around land and power. They learn how to dismantle systems of oppression through

community voice, including by increasing equitable access to education, social services, and healthcare (Beals & Wilson, 2020) – before, during, and after the current pandemic.

The hope is (and radical reimaginings are based in hope) that increased awareness of oppression and inequitable power inspires people to commit to transformative social change as they engage with radical imagination to envision and move towards a more just society. Thus, we use our conceptual model in sharing knowledge to better understand neoliberal cracks currently happening and how they are impacted by this pandemic. Recommendations for how the conceptual model can be applied by CP practitioners and others are now discussed.

In Canada, many reading this paper will have access to sheltering at home, functional internet, and the ability to work remotely, and enough food and money to eat well and pay the bills each month. However, this is not the case for the vulnerable “public facing” population (Corak, 2020, para. 11). These include ‘essential workers’, such as cleaners, servers, personal care workers, sanitation workers, transit workers, and grocery store workers – many of whom are women and primary caregivers. Yet, these vulnerable populations are putting their lives on the line during this pandemic crisis to service the more affluent classes (Scott, 2020), while often working low-wage, precarious jobs and maintaining less stable housing with families that are less secure (Corak, 2020; Scott, 2020). Corak (2020) argues, in the context of COVID-19, “In much of this there is no question of merit and just desert, it’s just bad luck” (para. 16). But is it though? A critical analysis shows how neoliberalism has stripped social safety nets through severe austerity cuts, including social programs that, in the not-so-distant-past, were used to support and protect our society’s most vulnerable, all while the already rich continue

to benefit from global markets to ever increase their wealth⁵ (Baker, 2006). As we move towards reimagining an equitable and just society, we choose to envision transformational change beyond the current confines of neoliberalism. Here are two concrete possibilities for transformation and their connections to our conceptual model, in the areas of mental health and climate justice.

Possibilities for Transformation: Mental Health

As an example showing how neoliberalism has affected the health equity of marginalized populations, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how Canada continues to fail in providing adequate mental health care, despite government officials at all levels advised to plan for a surge in the need for mental health support (Harris, 2020). Marginalized communities were already more at risk and, with pandemic-related stressors (i.e., loss of income, higher-level of risk, poor access to care), these communities are now even more vulnerable (Cressy, 2020; Harris, 2020). Such mental health vulnerabilities can lead to short-term effects such as acute-stress disorder, anxiety and depression, and long-term effects including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Harris, 2020). Thus, this current pandemic is not only a physical health crisis, but also a mental health care challenge. Based on the gaps in the current mental health system and the pandemic exposing how vulnerable groups will not receive equitable care (Bongiorno, 2021; CAMH, 2020; Vaillancourt et al., 2021), this calls attention towards the need for immediate change.

All people in Canada are experiencing the effects of the pandemic crisis in various ways; however, it has become quite evident that this shock is not the great equalizer, as in everyone is affected by the COVID-19

pandemic in the same way. The SARS-CoV-2 virus greatly impacts marginalized communities differently (Government of Canada, 2021). Considering what has been revealed during this pandemic, we now understand why it was unjust that earlier in the pandemic (March 2020), it was known that Canada was not collecting COVID-19-related race-based health data (Osman, 2020). Consequently, inequities in mental health care were not addressed, as the liberal “colour-blind” approach to understanding health care disparities did not need to be acknowledged by those in power in setting pandemic mental health care policies and practices (Walcott, 2016). Yet, it is evident from the data available that the experiences of COVID-19 are and will continue to be inequitable for Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities (Sieroka, 2021). Moreover, even if the COVID-19 pandemic comes to a “successful conclusion” (after all, many of us still and will continue to suffer the consequences of the current climate crisis), there will be inequitable long-term effects. Previous studies of the 2003 SARS-CoV outbreak have shown that a year after the outbreak, the traumatic experience of frontline workers contributed to long-term symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety (McAlonan et al., 2007).

Nonetheless, these cracks in our current ideological neoliberal society are opportunities to radically transform how mental health care is delivered. One such example is the Radical Healing framework by French et al. (2017), developed as a culturally relevant resource of healing for BIR communities. The Radical Healing model centers on conscious healing and proactively considers the relationship between justice and wellness, while resisting racism and oppression (French et al., 2017). Furthermore, as community psychologists,

⁵ “For the first time in human history, the world had more than 3,000 billionaires in 2020 ... This amounts to a 13.4 percent increase in billionaires since 2019, currently totaling 3,204

individuals, with a median wealth of \$1.9 billion. Billionaires’ collective wealth swelled to \$10 trillion, a 5.7 percent increase from 2019” (Austin, 2021; Peterson-Withorn, 2021).

we can move towards a decolonial healing space and practice in the realm of mental health research. The unlearning of traditional methods includes moving away from training on being 'culturally competent,' while acknowledging that mental health impacts for many BIR communities comes from the trauma of oppression and colonization (Mullan, as cited by Zapata, 2020). We can also challenge racism and xenophobia harming racialized communities, including the stereotyping of people of Asian descent who have been unjustly blamed for the spread of COVID-19 (Neville et al., 2020). Jones (2017) describes the dismissal of humanity's emotional experience as damage done by neoliberalism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy. By taking advantage of the cracks in neoliberalism shown in our conceptual model, community psychologists who work in mental health research can and should demonstrate greater humanity and compassion towards collective suffering, particularly for those most marginalized and vulnerable.

Possibilities for Transformation: Climate Change and the Case for a Green New Deal

If we are going to survive as human beings interconnected with Mother Earth and all her relatives, it is crucial that our collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic must include a longer-term vision that accounts for and addresses the converging crises of inequality, climate change, and biodiversity decline (Figueres, 2020; Haymarket Books, 2020; Jones, 2020; TNI Staff, 2020). The Green New Deal (GND) is one such sweeping parliamentary resolution introduced into the Canadian federal government, with various iterations introduced in governments in the US, and countries around the world. The GND is designed to simultaneously address multiple intersecting socioeconomic inequalities and ecological crises – in particular the climate crisis – at both the urgent speed and society-wide scale required

(Klein, 2019). In Canada, the GND has moved forward as the M-1 Motion, introduced in Parliament, December 2019 (Our Time, n.d.). It is broadly described as a 10-year national mobilization to: 1) reach net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, 2) create millions of secure jobs, 3) invest in sustainable infrastructure and industry, and 4) promote justice and equity for Indigenous peoples and all "frontline and vulnerable communities" (Our Time, n.d.).

Clearly, a GND is not a replacement for a coordinated public health response to the current pandemic; however, it does take the long view to ensure we are addressing our multiple, intersecting crises holistically, through a coordinated nation-wide response. To center justice, as we have argued here, the GND also needs to incorporate critical decoloniality and intersectionality lenses for informing all policy decisions that might emerge under its banner. In the Canadian settler nation-state context, we envision that this might include (but not be limited to): centering the voices and demands of Indigenous and marginalized communities, with full participation in developing the national framework for a GND; ensuring Indigenous and marginalized communities are empowered with the resources and supports necessary to lead GND efforts at the community level and ensuring Canada's full implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights for Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Additionally, supporting calls for and due process to implement and respect full Indigenous sovereignty where desired by Indigenous Nations within the colonial state is a necessary requirement. With this framework, and a diverse, bold, and vigilant social movement backing it up, it is possible that a made-in-Canada Green New Deal could begin to meaningfully address multiple large-scale, intersecting crises, building towards a more just society at urgent scale and speed.

In that vein, community psychologists are well-positioned to play leading roles in advocating at municipal, provincial, and national-level policies for climate justice, including but not limited to a GND. For example, in this era of climate catastrophes, access to dignified, affordable housing is considered a climate justice solution (Rice et al., 2019) and is one that CP practitioners helped move into a nation-wide program in Canada through the At Home/Chez Soi Housing First initiative (Macnaughton et al., 2013). As Nelson (2013) argues, when advocating for transformative policy change in the neoliberal era, there are a range of unique roles that community psychologists can and do play, including as policy advisors; allies to progressive social movements; program innovators; public intellectuals; researchers/evaluators; and partnership makers, among other socially-just roles. In an era of enormous change and multiple converging threats to community wellbeing and social justice – core values of the community psychology field – it is crucial for all CP practitioners to engage with these issues and identify meaningful roles to play in advancing progressive, justice-based policy and advocacy in the public sphere.

Discussion

Our quest has been to assess how to critically use social theories to move towards a more just society, while revealing how neoliberalism informs and seeks to limit equitable and anti-oppressive responses during the current COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, we proposed a conceptual model using theories of decoloniality and intersectionality to inform social transformation towards a more just society; a society where Indigenous sovereignty is achieved, and social and economic justice are restored to all who are marginalized in various intersectional ways of being. Decoloniality and intersectionality theories are crucial to understanding a socially-just

society, as they involve resistance, disruption, and pushing back against colonial systems and hierarchies of knowledge and power. We can incite disruption through critical consciousness-raising and collective radical reimagination to envision possibilities for what could be. In the following sections, we discussed insights learned from engaging with decoloniality and intersectionality theories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as we provide recommendations for the community psychology field.

Unfortunately, we are currently facing not one, but multiple converging large-scale crises, which threaten to exacerbate each other if they are not holistically and urgently addressed, from the accelerating global climate crisis (Field, 2014; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2014, 2018); worsening global and localized inequalities (UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab, 2018); rapid biodiversity decline (Kolbert, 2014; Rockström et al., 2009), and now the global COVID-19 pandemic. What connects each of these crises is their roots in the planet- and people-destroying nature of neoliberalism, upending the stability of our planet and threatening to launch us into a dark new era of cascading, ever-worsening crises (Navarro, 2020). In reflecting on practical applications of our conceptual model, it is clear there is an urgent need to use the revealed cracks in neoliberalism to push visionary, societal-level and global transformations that put Mother Earth and all her relatives at the forefront of a just society.

One of the many lessons from the pandemic is that when society decides a threat is urgent enough to address, our economies can retool, revise, and change at astonishing speed (Galbraith & Otto, 2020; Jones, 2020). This approximates the speed and scale of change needed to address other major crises, including increasing social inequalities (UNESCO Inequality Report, 2018) and the global climate crisis (IPCC, 2018). As a

society, we need to conceptualize solutions that are more than simply reactionary, but also visionary, addressing the present crises we face with urgency, while building towards a far more just, livable, thriving, and compassionate future.

Recommendations for Community Psychology

While recognizing the immense body of work in the areas of decoloniality, intersectionality, and social transformation theories such as reimagination, we seek to build upon critical theorizing in the context of the current pandemic by presenting the following recommendations for CP scholars: 1) referencing the conceptual model, in particular its integration of decoloniality and intersectionality theories, within social transformation work during this pandemic and in the face of other multiple, ongoing crises, 2) in responding to crisis situations, CP practitioners should continue to develop and tangibly support pre-existing grassroots social movements, which have been continually addressing the inequities exacerbated by COVID-19, and 3) increase working connections amongst researchers nationally and internationally, to reduce the more US-centric focus in the field.

To further expand on each of the above points, firstly, our conceptual model supports and builds upon Prilleltensky's (2014) position of transformative change as a multifaceted continuum. As doctoral student authors who continue to learn about the necessity of critical engagement for real transformation in our communities, we hope that CP researchers will choose to place their work on the critical edge of this continuum. It is crucial that research with communities is aimed towards disrupting structural spaces of power that are rooted in neoliberalism and coloniality by taking an intersectional lens, which can then lead to more justice-based transformative change.

Secondly, in response to crises, researchers and practitioners can assist with developing and supporting existing community initiatives that center the narratives of marginalized communities, especially those who continue to be oppressed by the system of neoliberalism. CP scholars can assist with developing a vision or reinforcing an existing vision of justice-based transformative change, through social organizing and movements. This means working alongside social movements advocating for social justice, while disrupting spaces that hold structural power. We feel that it is our moral obligation as scholars and human beings to respond compassionately during a time of crisis, and to strongly emphasize during these times both what is unjust and what can be done to move towards a more just society.

Lastly, we believe that community psychology can do a better job of working together as a collective. Great work and research are being done in the field, which unfortunately at times can be left unnoticed or difficult to sustain over longer periods of time. Arguably, this may be a strategic response from institutions that hold power (e.g., which projects get funded), to ensure that activism is done at a distance and does not have the opportunity to overhaul colonial systems. Organizing ourselves as scholar-activists will not only strengthen the work with and in our communities but will also demonstrate that many of us are working towards similar goals and outcomes – just societies. There are opportunities to cultivate our individual passions by finding the points of intersections and working together as a collective, which will only strengthen our voices and visions towards real, transformative systems change. We challenge the CP field in Canada by asking, “In the face of multiple intersecting urgent crises, how can we better work together towards a collective vision of a more just, sustainable society?”

Conclusion

COVID-19 has forced us into a constantly shifting landscape exposing how the neoliberal system is failing us. Now more than ever, in the face of these crises, we need critical social transformation. Our current neoliberal economic and governance system is strained, and people are becoming disillusioned and noticing the cracks. We stand on the precipice of global shock events that could be the gateway to major societal upheaval, that with proper guidance, could lead towards a far more just society. However, we need to act soon. Neoliberalism is nothing if not adaptable and shifty, and those who currently benefit from this system can and often do use their power to reshape the dominant narrative of how we understand and respond to crisis. Moreover, the dominant narrative is shifting in pace with the COVID-19 pandemic, so without a significant, concerted push for transformation soon, our chance to significantly weaken the walls of neoliberalism and break out of this oppressive system may close once again. If neoliberalism is given the chance to right itself and establish homeostasis, it will come at the expense of the marginalized, the systemically oppressed and Mother Earth. Hence, we argue that justice-based social transformation, informed by critical equity-based social theories, is what is most urgently needed now.

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