Contemporary Debates in Critical Psychology: Dialectics and Syntheses

STEPHANIE AUSTIN
York University, Canada

ISAAC PRILLELTENSKY
Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne

Although critical psychology has been gaining momentum in recent years, it is by no means a monolithic entity. In order to understand the variety of strands within critical psychology, we conducted a formative evaluation of the field. The intention of the study was to provide critical psychologists with an opportunity to reflect on the development of the subdiscipline. We were interested in determining the state of critical psychology as a growing field, and providing some direction for the future. The research involved the participation of 25 self-identified critical psychologists from 10 different countries. The findings of this qualitative inquiry point to three dialectics in the areas of action (theory/practice), method (denunciation/annunciation), and context (inside/outside). The findings also point to future directions for critical psychology at the micro, meso, and macro levels of interventions.

Points of Departure

As psychologists and citizens involved in critical psychology, we cannot avoid having our own idea of what critical psychology is or should be. But we are very much aware that our vision is partial. In this article we explore how our conceptualisation of critical psychology compares with the opinions of self-identified critical psychologists. The main objective of the research was to elucidate the main debates within critical psychology and to offer possible theoretical and practical resolutions. Throughout this article we strive to be very clear about the different voices being represented. We state explicitly that which we heard from different critical psychologists, and that which is our own interpretation of the material. At times we agree with our participants' prescriptions for the field, but at times we beg to differ. Needless to say, we do not claim to have superior authority on the definition of the present or the future of critical psychology, but it behoves us to ascertain our position with as much clarity as possible.

To facilitate scrutiny of our own position, we articulate first our own approach to critical psychology. We look at critical psychology as a means of promoting social action; we are concerned with changing and not just understanding the world. The critical psychology we espouse is critical of the status quo in society and in psychology. It is critical of the status quo in society because it perpetuates forms of oppression, and it is critical of mainstream psychology because it supports forms of domination (Prilleltensky, 1994). Critical psychology, in our view, is a strategy aimed at politicising all subdisciplines in psychology. It is a metadiscipline in that it enables the field of psychology to critically evaluate its moral and political implications. Just as methodology enables psychology to understand and measure human phenomena, a critical dimension makes it possible to assess the moral and political repercussions of psychological theories and practices (Prilleltensky, 1994; Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997). Critical psychology focuses on reshaping the discipline of psychology in order to promote emancipation in society (Parker, 1999; Teo, 1998, 1999).

The concepts of oppression and emancipation are at the core of critical psychology. By oppression we mean both a state of subjugation and a process of exclusion and exploitation. Oppression involves psychological as well as political dimensions. In light of these central characteristics, Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) defined oppression as "a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, where the dominating persons or groups exercise their power by restricting access to material resources and by implanting in the subordinated persons or groups fear or self-deprecating views about themselves" (p. 129). Oppression involves structural inequality, which is reproduced by the everyday practices of perhaps well-meaning but unsuspecting citizens who collude with dominating forces in society. As Young (1990) explained, the causes of oppression "are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (p. 41).

When we invoke emancipation, we refer to the person's life opportunities as they relate to power (Teo, 1998). As psychologists dealing with subjective experience, it is essential that we concern ourselves with power. Similar to the definition of oppression, emancipation can be conceptualised both as a state and a process that includes psychological and political dimensions. Emancipation is the experience of freedom from internal and external sources of oppression,

and the ability to pursue physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social development. This notion of emancipation builds on Fromm's (1965) dual conception of freedom: freedom from social and psychological sources of oppression, and freedom to pursue one's objectives in life. Freedom from social oppression entails the experience of liberation from class exploitation, gender domination, and ethnic discrimination, for instance. Freedom from internal and psychological sources includes overcoming fears, obsessions, or other psychological phenomena that interfere with a person's subjective experience of wellbeing. The promotion of freedom and the elimination of oppression are fundamental concepts for critical psychology. These focuses derive from diverse but converging traditions, not only within psychology, but in other disciplines as well (Austin & Prilleltensky, 1999).

We believe in the complementary function of different values in promoting personal and collective emancipation. The critical psychology we promote is based on a commitment to the values of caring and compassion, collaboration and democratic participation, self-determination, human diversity, and social justice (Prilleltensky, in press; Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997). These values are the starting point from which we launch critiques of mainstream psychology and of the social status quo. This kind of critical psychology goes beyond simply stating its values, by further exploring the various ways in which values complement and/or contradict one another in varying contexts (Prilleltensky, 1997). These are the basic tenets on which we structure our approach to critical psychology, but we are cognisant of the diversity within critical psychology (Austin & Prilleltensky, 1999). The position we articulated above is meant to locate us within this diversity. We want to be clear about where we stand. For this reason we will try to maintain a reflexive position throughout the paper, asserting the values and beliefs that determine the choices we make in writing.

Objectives and Methodology

The objective of this article is to provide an overview of the debates in critical psychology and to recommend paths for action. The formative evaluation of the field was informed by the published literature in critical psychology, and the contributions of critical psychologists working as academics and/or practitioners.

Participants were asked a series of questions related to the historical and theoretical foundations of critical psychology, as well as to the applications of critical psychology in the areas of teaching, research, and community work. Each participant was invited to respond to these questions in essay form or using an interactive email forum. There were a total of 25 participants in this study. While 23 responded through the email discussion group, 2 responded in essay form. Participants were chosen using a purposeful sampling technique based on the following criteria: self-identification as a critical psychologist, gender balance, wide cross-section of geographical and cultural backgrounds, broad spectrum of subdisciplines in psychology, and diverse working experiences. In their writing, publications, community work and/or spoken word, the participants had a clearly articulated commitment to the vision and values of critical psychology, and this is why they were contacted. Participants were actively working toward the promotion of critical psychology in their chosen psychological subdiscipline (e.g., crosscultural, gay/lesbian, abnormal, community, political, clinical, developmental). Furthermore, each participant was working in at least two of the three chosen areas of practice (i.e., teaching, research, community work).

The sample was chosen with an attempt to achieve a gender balance and to represent a broad spectrum of expressions of critical psychology through geographic and cultural diversity. The 25 participants in the study were from 10 different countries. The sample consisted of 17 male and 8 female participants. The majority of the group was comprised of professionals who worked in a university setting, many of whom were also actively involved in community work. The contributions made by participants were read and analysed by the two authors. While many options existed for organising the data, on reflection it seemed to us that most contributions centred on three themes: action, method, and context. In the next section we elaborate on the debates within each one of these three domains. Following that, we discuss participants' suggestions for translating critical psychology tenets into action. In each of the two following sections we describe the input obtained from participants, compare the findings with the literature, and offer our own opinion on the issues.

Critical Psychologists Define Contemporary Debates

As it can be seen in Table 1, we have conceptualised the debates as falling in three different domains: action, method, and context. When we discuss action, we refer to the question *What* is done in critical psychology? Theory and practice are used to describe and define the role of critical psychological knowledge. When we call on method, we refer to the question *How* is it done? Denunciation and annunciation are two primary tools to define how critical psychologists do their work. Context refers to the question *Where* is it done? Inside and outside established institutional structures such as the university refer to the locations where critical psychological efforts are placed. The dialectics between theory and practice, denunciation and annunciation, and inside and outside reflect the different positions expressed by participants. The syntheses offered in Table 1 are advanced primarily by us as authors and interpreters of the data, but they were also invoked by several of the research participants. Participants identified themselves as falling somewhere along the three continuums of action, method, and context. Furthermore, they recognised the importance of engaging in both aspects of the dialectics. However, there were noticeable differences in terms of the emphasis people ascribed to theory or practice, denunciation or annunciation, and inside or outside work. Some felt strongly about theory, while others where more committed to practice. Some saw the need to engage in annunciation, but recognised that most work in critical psychology is denunciation. Finally, many acknowledged the need to do work outside the academy but admitted to being "stuck" within the university. We elaborate on the different domains below.

Theory and Practice

The need to understand and explain how psychology perpetuates unjust social structures was emphasised by participants. Many respondents vindicated the need for a sound theoretical foundation for critical psychology.

TABLE 1

Contemporary Debates in Critical Psychology

Domain	Dialectic	Synthesis
Action	Theory and practice	Praxis
Method	Denunciation and annunciation	Construction
Context	Inside and outside	Community involvement

Conceptualising a world in which justice and liberation are achievable requires not only strategies for action but also reflection. Teo (in press) strongly emphasises the importance of theory in critical psychology by highlighting the need to critique mainstream psychology's theoretical weakness and ideological commitments to upholding an unjust status quo. From this recognition, he suggests that a strong theoretical component in critical psychology is not only helpful but necessary.

Theory, in one research response, was presented as "an intellectual artifact devoid of transformative effects". This could be explained by another response suggesting that "theory is a word that evokes modernist notions of legitimacy and sounds exclusive and closed". When too much emphasis is placed on theory, the result is "few descriptions of modes of practice designed to contest oppression and foster conscientization". The data point to the heart of the matter in a discussion of the "thirst for discussion on modes of action" in critical psychology. The goal of any critical practice, whether theoretical or applied, is "to overturn all circumstances in which the human is a degraded, a subjugated, a forsaken, a contemptible being" (Teo, in press, p. 1).

The tension between theory and practice is a highly contested debate in critical psychology (Rappaport & Stewart, 1997). It would seem, at present, that theories about human suffering and exploitation predominate over action. In this sense, it is important to be reminded that *no action* constitutes *an action* in support of the status quo (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Many participants in the study agreed that "critical psychology should (move towards) political activity" because social problems are "resolved best in struggle not speculation". We agree with Spears, who claims that critical psychology needs to be actively engaged in efforts to transform the status quo because change is born through practice (Spears, 1997).

Having described the diverse positions that critical psychologists may take, some emphasising theory and others emphasising practice, we would like to suggest a synthesis of theory and practice embodied in the concept of praxis. In the collected responses from the research there was an acknowledgment of the importance of balancing theory and practice.

In the literature, the inconsistency between calling for practical interventions aimed at structural change and refusing to become politically involved is often challenged (Berryman, 1987). Many critical psychologists support the need for an integration of reflection and action in the process of change, as reflected by participants in our research.

In our view, engaging in critical praxis can be the step that is taken to ensure that critical psychological knowledge is used in accordance with the needs of oppressed people, as defined by oppressed people. It can also be an opportunity to strengthen one's theoretical insights by grounding these in experience (Prilleltensky, in press). For some, like Teo (in press), critical practice is the ultimate criterion for critical psychology.

Denunciation and Annunciation

It became evident throughout the research that the methodological tool most often used in critical psychology is denunciation. This technique enables a fundamental questioning of psychology's underlying assumptions and is useful as one strategy among others that can help to critique the status quo (Parker & Shotter, 1990). Critically evaluating truth claims in psychology can help dismantle what has been taken for granted as the only way of conceptualising psychological phenomena. This creates an opportunity for

expanding the field of inquiry to be more reflective of the realities of groups who have typically been excluded or neglected in the formation of knowledge in psychology. Furthermore, it opens up the possibility of being more responsive to the needs of marginalised groups who, rather than having been helped by psychology, have sometimes been victimised by the discipline (Burman et al., 1996).

Whereas denunciation or deconstruction have received much attention in critical psychology, annunciation has been widely neglected (Teo, in press). In our view, deconstruction and critique are useful tools, but only to the extent that they are not taken to the extreme. A feeling of helplessness, often the result of an over-reliance on critique and deconstruction, contributes to disillusionment and cynicism concerning the status quo in psychology and in society (Gill, 1995; Spears, 1997).

Annunciation is the creative process whereby we articulate an alternative to the status quo. Critical opposition must be plural, using different tactics to reach its aims (Parker, 1989). In our view, if critical psychology is to be true to its vision of a more equitable society, it should be engaged in actions that go beyond the intellectual exercise of conceptual deconstruction. From the following commentary by a participant, we learn that it is necessary to ask ourselves "what can be DONE beyond description and denunciation about (as an example) human rights violations?". As some critics suggest in the literature, it is doubtful that racism will be eliminated by solely challenging discourse (Wilkinson, 1997).

A theoretical denunciation of the oppressive ramifications of mainstream psychology may be viewed as safer and simpler than the annunciation of concrete strategies for action to make psychology more responsive to people's need/desire for emancipation. An excerpt from the data supports this main point by saying that "it is easier to destroy than to create". Furthermore, the argument is made that "too many revolutions, both social and political, think too much on how to tear apart the system, but not enough on how to fairly create a new one".

We think that a turn away from solely relying on deconstruction or denunciation toward actively engaging in annunciation would represent a timely shift in critical psychology. The synthesis that we support in the dialectic of denunciation and annunciation is construction: the active process of both critically interrogating what is in place and creatively building something better.

Inside and Outside

Critical psychology has been undertaken mostly by a group of professionals working inside the academy. It has been noted in the responses collected in the study as well as in the critical psychological literature that the "inaccessibility of psychology's ways of knowing" has been problematic not only in mainstream psychology but in critical psychology as well. Language, knowledge, and approaches used in critical psychology should not be inaccessible to those people who find themselves outside academic circles. This barrier only contributes to the maintenance of the inequitable distributions of power in society, something that much of critical psychology seeks to disrupt. As one participant noted, "the primary ethic of our work needs to be to change the outcomes of our societal institutions — otherwise we are indeed just another new academic sub-discipline with no impact on knowledge or the world".

Traditional academic work in psychology has not been aligned with action-oriented social justice work outside the academy. Thus, it is difficult to justify professional involvement inside and outside the academy without feeling torn between our roles as academics and activists. The preferred

synthesis in the inside and outside dialectic is, in our opinion, community involvement. The challenge is in attaining this standard. As academics, we are not congruent when the research that is deemed legitimate in our department is not the action research we would like to promote. We may succumb to the pressures and demands of our institutional allegiances and engage in research that does not challenge the status quo. On the other hand, we may also feel uncomfortable criticising the very institution that helps us sustain ourselves financially and otherwise.

There are many concrete examples of the rewards that await us when academic work and activism are synthesised through community involvement. The work of Bennett and Campbell (1996) in the area of community-shared agriculture is an inspiring account of the way knowledge and skills acquired through the academic study of community psychology has been useful in improving community living in rural areas. Also, Nelson, Lord, and Ochocka (in press) have worked with psychiatric consumer/survivors on self-help and mutual aid initiatives that have had transformative outcomes for all the participants involved. In the British context, a similar example can be pulled from an interview with Ian Parker and Erica Burman. Parker discussed his work in collaboration with a community group called the Hearing Voices Network. This group is a present-day expression of the anti-psychiatry movement in that it consists mainly of people who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia and use psychiatric services but resist the traditional definitions of their experience. When Parker described the experience of having a Hearing Voices Network conference in an academic setting, it provides a clear example of the liberatory potential of critical work in psychology. He suggested that having the conference in a university "levelled out the accounts that are normally privileged as being 'scientific', and put the voices of those who are normally the objects of science into the debate" (Parker, as cited in Law & Lax, 1998, p. 57).

Critical Psychologists Propose Action

From the debates outlined above and the syntheses that have been proposed, we would like to suggest future directions for critical psychology. The section that follows describes the contributions that critical psychology can make to the promotion of emancipation and liberation through psychology. Responses from critical psychologists who participated in the study are organised to reflect how critical psychology can be used to change inequitable relationships of power and to transform the traditional understanding of the role of psychology and psychologists. Weaving together many of the quotes generated in the formative evaluation has helped us to ground the present discussion in the words of critical psychologists themselves. From our perspective, the common thread throughout the data collected is clearly a conviction that critical psychology can have a transformative effect on the way psychology is practiced. We resonate very much with participants' convictions regarding action.

Analysis of Power Relations

A critical analysis of the way power is (mis)used in society and in psychology was an area of concern that was discussed at length in participants' responses. Using the words of participants, we share the main thoughts expressed about how critical psychology can contribute to action by providing a critical analysis of the power systems that are presently in place. According to one respondent, critical psychology is a "psychological theory that overtly challenges social institutions and ideological structures

related to the reproduction of social relations of domination and oppression".

It has been suggested in the data that "psychology, our discipline, is itself a formal resource that is unequally distributed; that is, access to psychology and the production of psychological knowledge is unequally distributed among populations in the world". Another response stated that the goal of critical psychological work should be of "dismantling the mainstream's hegemony" both in psychology and in society because critical psychology "recognizes that modern society is marked by widespread injustice" and "that the societal status quo contributes to oppression". Furthermore, one response stated that critical psychology "critically looks at the values undergirding the market economy and political structures". Through this form of interrogation of exploitative power structures in society, critical psychology "critiques resistance to social change".

The fact that critical psychology "recognizes the effects of the politics of exclusion" reflects critical psychology's commitment to addressing social injustice. One participant noted an example of the way critical psychology has been helpful for "critically analyzing all mainstream theorizing through lesbian feminism and anti-racism education". Central to the work is a critical exploration of "issues of poverty, social policies that victimize the poor and blame mothers".

As one participant suggested in an analysis of how critical psychology could use power for emancipatory rather than oppressive ends:

> Psychologists are inherently involved in the political process and this should be part of our teaching, this should certainly be explicit in our research and our interventions in the practical domain; whether it be education, health, environment, community or politics proper, all these interventions, we should be making them with our ideology explicit.

Respondents believed in the importance of striving to "promote real democracy" by participating actively in a "redistribution of resources (knowledge as resource, power as resource)". Engaged in a critical "analysis of social power relations", a "critical analysis of the use of language", and an integration of "knowledge of social processes and relationships", the work of critical psychologists is intended to "alter paradigms that perpetuate oppressive realities".

Redefinition of the Role of Psychology and Psychologists

From our reading and interpretation of the findings of this research, we believe that critical psychology, as a movement, can facilitate and enable concrete change on the micro (individual), meso (organisational), and macro (societal) levels of intervention. At the micro level, critical psychology is involved in reestablishing respect in the relationships that exist between psychologists and citizens. On a broader-based level (meso), critical psychology challenges the mainstream discipline to look at itself critically. Additionally, at the macro level, critical psychology invites all social agents to be actively involved in creating a more equitable society.

Micro-level context: Re-introducing respect in relationships. From the perspective of respondents, "the needs, desires and values of oppressed people fighting for change are the starting point, the principal guide" in critical psychology. There is a clear commitment to "taking the subjectivity of students, participants, community members seriously" and to "listening to what they tell me about the circumstances of their lives". Critical psychology "considers

the importance of contexts in shaping behaviour, interests, of people not agencies". The context through which *caring* and *helping* have become professionalised has in many circumstances had abusive effects on the people who are most vulnerable. Critical psychology has challenged this process of dehumanising the most human of interactions: the helping relationship.

Being heard and validated as a person as well as engaging in "collective action decided by people for themselves and on their own terms" has transformative effects and "enables a taking control of their own lives and situations". This is the process through which people become empowered. Because it engages in "collaboration and cooperation" and creates a "community of support", critical psychology participates in action for change by building respectful relationships. Sometimes "the process itself is the result".

Meso-level context: Re-inventing our discipline. We agree with respondents when they describe critical psychology as a field that "goes beyond the conventional limits of psychology". It "pushes the boundaries of research" in that it participates in the "interruption of discourse" by giving "voice to the silenced". Critical psychology is "psychology from the standpoint of the subject", "psychology *for* not *about* individuals" [italics added]. The critical psychologist is engaged in "conscientious action research" and "develops action-oriented practices".

Critical psychology is a human science that does not hide behind a mask of objective perfection, rather "critical psychology is a psychology that shows its imperfections, dirty parts, differences in applications, and questions the omnipotence of psychology". As critical psychologists, "we assess human behaviour in context with an understanding that our assessment is inherently biased in some ways and is a social construction itself".

One participant suggested that "holistic approaches are needed, that is a move away from the reductionism that pervades mainstream psychology". Critical psychology has taken on this challenge by recognising the inevitability and worth of "complexity... no certainty... diversity" in human activity and experience. From our perspective, and based on the responses generated from participants in this research, critical psychology "recognizes that psychology's values, assumptions and practices have been culturally and historically determined".

Macro-level context: Re-imagining social justice. This broad level of analysis is integrated into critical psychological work. Inspired by "a vision of a better world... openness... change... hope... action... re-envisioning" critical psychology "seeks to alter and ultimately provide alternatives to both mainstream psychology's norms and the societal institutions that those norms strengthen". As one participant clearly articulated, "critical psychology with a practical intention should change our psychological knowledge about the subject in society, and in doing so should pave the way to overturn those circumstances in which the human is a degraded, subjugated, forsaken, and contemptible being". Through its theoretical and practical interventions, critical psychology "provides a forum through which the notion that society can be transformed to promote meaningful lives and social justice can be lived out". There is a clear emphasis on the fact that, with a critical component, "psychology can contribute to the creation of more just and meaningful ways of living".

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to conduct a formative evaluation of critical psychology to identify current issues

and debates within the field and to propose courses of action. We organised participants' input into three debates related to action, method, and context. From participants' perspectives and from our own point of view, these debates can be constructively reframed in a search for praxis, construction, and community involvement, respectively.

With regards to action in critical psychology, we organised the responses into three levels of interventions: micro, meso, and macro spheres of analysis and interventions. We illustrated how critical psychologists can make an impact in promoting respectful relationships, in refashioning the discipline of psychology, and in advancing social justice.

Although we propose syntheses for the dialectics identified in the research, we are aware that our suggestions are limited by our own lenses of what critical psychology is and what it should be. Other perspectives that were not revealed or obtained through this research surely exist. Hence, we exercise caution and remind the reader of our own location within critical psychology, as articulated at the onset of this article.

Critical psychology is a dynamic and evolving field. A contribution of this research has been to provide a picture, however partial, of where the field is today and what aims it should strive to accomplish. Against our recommendations for action, some critical psychologists may argue that it is too soon to move to action, that it is premature to move toward construction, and that we need to know more about community involvement. We would argue that we will never reach absolute certainty or legitimacy regarding our suggested interventions. Ultimately, we need to determine the risks of acting versus not acting, and the risks of asserting our embryonic values versus leaving a moral void.

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