

Power and Action in Critical Theory Across Disciplines: Implications for Critical Community Psychology

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Abstract Although critical scholarship and community psychology share similar aspirations, the links between them remain unexplored and under-theorized. In this article we explore the implications of critical scholarship in various specialties for the field of community psychology. To understand the contributions of critical scholarship to a theory of power and action for social change, we conducted a systematic analysis of a ten-year period of publications in seven journals associated with the critical scholarship tradition. We created precise criteria for the concepts of power and action and applied them to the publications. Results indicate an interesting paradox at play. Whereas community psychology is more action oriented than critical scholarship, its actions fall short of challenging institutionalized power structures and the status quo; and whereas critical scholarship is more challenging of the status quo than community psychology in theory, it has failed to produce viable actions that challenge the status quo. We discuss the implications of this state of affairs for the development of a more critical community psychology.

Keywords Critical scholarship · Discourse · Action · Power · Interdisciplinary collaborations

Introduction

As the field of community psychology strives to become more interdisciplinary, as reflected in this special issue, it

faces several challenges. What disciplines are relevant for community psychologists' areas of interest? Where should one start tapping into the vast knowledge base of other disciplines? What do other disciplines have to offer beyond what is already known within community psychology? In this article we present a systematic approach to some of these challenges. We illustrate this approach by evaluating seven journals of different disciplines for two topics of particular interest to community psychologists: power and social action.

It made sense to us to start the search for other disciplines' contribution to these topics with scholarship that shares some common values with community psychology. While seldom acknowledged, community psychology shares some of the roots and some of the content of contemporary critical scholarship. In large part, both fields strive to meld theory with action, applied psychology with policy development, and the Marxist legacy of materialism with anthropological and psychological concerns for culture, cognitions, emotions and behavior. Though largely unexplored, this similitude can render valuable lessons for both critical scholarship and community psychology. We posit that an exploration of common concerns in both fields can produce mutually beneficial outcomes. Since both fields share a concern for how power relations affect well-being, and how action can evolve into desirable social change, we set out to explore how power and action are treated in each field.

Several of us are community psychologists, and we were fairly familiar with the contributions of our field to issues of *power* and *action* (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Prilleltensky, in press), but we lacked systematic knowledge of how contemporary critical scholarship dealt with these two concepts. To elucidate points of convergence and divergence between community psychology and critical scholarship on issues of power and action, we decided to explore in depth

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what critical scholars had to say about these two constructs. We deem this a necessary first step in building a dialogue across disciplines with similar values. Our research provides an exploratory illustration of potential synergies across affiliated disciplines sharing a value-base.

What is critical scholarship?

The search for common denominators in critical theory poses risks of omission as well as commission. Whereas some associate critical theory with the progressive project of modernity, according to which rationality would ultimately set humans free, such as Habermas, others include poststructuralist thinkers such as Foucault and Lyotard who are much more reticent about the idea of historical advancement. Their poststructuralist challenge entails skepticism about the ability of rationality to liberate human beings from oppression (Foucault, 1980, 1984, 1997; Habermas, 1971; Kögler, 1999; McCarthy, 2001; Morrow & Torres, 2002). But this paper is not about theoretical purity. Rather, it is about the promotion of certain tenets first enunciated by the Frankfurt School of thought and later embraced by thinkers of diverse disciplinary backgrounds. The Frankfurt School coined the term critical theory in the 1930s to signify a departure from traditional social science theory, which was viewed as supportive of the status quo, and devoid of transformational potential. In varying degrees, some proponents of both modernity and post-modernity uphold the values and tenets of critical theory (Peters, Lankshear, & Olssen, 2003a). While modernists believe in the potential of science to advance well-being and emancipation, post-modernists cast doubts on the ability of science to overcome power differentials and conflicts of interests in the pursuit of social progress. But both strands of critical theory, modern and post-modern believe that power and conflicts of interests play a vital role in human development, emancipation, and well-being.

As originally formulated by Max Horkheimer in the thirties, Director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, known as the Frankfurt School, critical theory was primarily concerned with the development of a philosophy that would accelerate the progression towards a just society (Horkheimer, 1972). Since its inception, critical theory has been primarily concerned with the elimination of oppression and the promotion of justice. We call this the *transformative concern* of critical theory. Associated with it is the belief that people can become agents of change and individually and collectively progress toward higher planes of satisfaction and freedom. Liberation is a theme that runs through critical theory; liberation from objective oppressors such as colonizers and exploitive employers, and liberation from subjective forces such as mass culture and ideology (Montero & Fernandez Christlieb, 2003)

Peters, Lankshear, and Olssen capture succinctly the transformative concern of critical theory: “Adopting the viewpoint of oppressed social groups, it expressly seeks to become an agent in the promotion of social change and transformation” (2003b, p. 5). This concern encompasses issues such as domination, power differentials, inequity, and the role of ideological apparatuses in convincing the masses that the present state of affairs is not only the best, but also the only possible one. Critical theorists of various persuasions would agree that these themes were central to the Frankfurt school and continue to be a primary concern within the field (Bronner, 2002; Hohendahl & Fisher, 2001).

But as soon as questions of social change emerge, questions of epistemology are not far behind. To transform society we require theories to make sense of how society operates and how we might effectively change it. We call this the *epistemic concern* of critical theory. Although gradations in emphases may be noted, most critical theorists espouse a dialectical view of change whereby people and social structures are reciprocally determined. While postmodern critical theorists ascribe less power to agents of change than earlier ones, they do not renounce the agentic capacity of citizens. They study particular ways in which societal structures, such as educational and cultural discourse, form and reform subjectivity; that is, the perceptions individuals hold about themselves and the society around them (Morrow & Torres, 2002).

Systemic thinking reinforces reciprocal determinism in critical theory. Social phenomena are examined in terms of the connection between parts and wholes. Interdisciplinary approaches, in turn, support both systemic thinking and reciprocal determinism. Critical theory is not the sole property of any one major discipline. Rather, it is present in multiple disciplines, such as politics, economics, psychology, sociology, education, history, and other fields. This commitment to dynamic and multiple perspectives ensures a comprehensive epistemology that defies reductionistic approaches (Kögler, 1999; Peters et al., 2003a).

Within critical theory we find thinkers who lean towards social constructionism (i.e., the belief that reality is very much socially defined) and others who favor critical realism (i.e., the belief that there are “unjust” social structures independent of observers). But in both cases pluralistic methodologies are invoked to advance the transformational concern. In our view, the commitment to social transformation is what distinguishes critical theorists from others who subscribe to poststructuralist conceptions but who lack the concern for transformation. A commitment to critical epistemology and to critical transformation must be present. Without the latter, we witness postmodern epistemologies, but not critical theory in the original sense of the Frankfurt School. This is, in part, what drives this research: The need to reclaim the dual concerns of critical theory. Without a sound theory

we witness, at best, ill-conceived interventions that result in momentary changes. Without a concern for change, we engage in ethereal theorizing that is detached from the pressing needs of oppressed people (McCarthy, 2001; Philo & Miller, 2001; Steele, 2003).

The range of critical perspectives may be found in multiple public discourses and in a variety of journals and book series. In the last fifteen years or so there has been a proliferation of journals and groups associated with the critical theory tradition. Some journals include, *Critical Social Policy*, *Critical Study of Mass Communication*, *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, *Critical Sociology*, and most recently *Critical Discourse Studies* and *Critical Studies – Critical Methodologies*. Some associations include the Radical Psychology Network, Radical Pedagogy, and the Critical Management Studies division of the Academy of Management. In one way or another, these outlets and groups identify with the tenets of critical theory. But to what extent they adhere to the transformational and epistemic concerns of critical theory is an open question worthy of examination. The answer to that question will help us understand the potential contributions of critical scholarship to community psychology.

Why do we need to evaluate critical scholarship?

The Achilles heel of critical theory might reside in its very name: critical *theory*. In true Marxist tradition, Horkheimer (1972) and his associates emphasized praxis, but over the years critical theory has had, at best, an ambiguous relationship with action. Primarily over the last twenty years, with the advent of postmodernism, cultural studies and social constructionism, a certain strain of paralysis by analysis has struck critical theory (McCarthy, 2001; McLaren, 2000; Philo & Miller, 2001).

Our working hypotheses are that critical theory in the last decade has privileged the epistemic concern over the transformational concern, and that when it has dealt with the transformational concern, it has done so without offering a program of action. In other words, it has concentrated more on deconstruction than in construction or reconstruction. A deconstructive focus highlights the limits of a given theory or approach to demonstrate its unacceptability, whereas a reconstructive approach attempts to learn from these limits in order to construct something more generative. While deconstruction is necessarily a part of reconstruction, the latter does not automatically derive from the former. An intentional plan is required to translate deconstructive lessons on power into strategies and tactics for change. That bridge, we suspect, is missing.

If critical theory is to become an agent of understanding and change, it must balance its theoretical interests in power, domination, and resistance with pragmatic steps for

collective action. An evaluation of critical theory, however nascent as ours might be, may help rehabilitate it and connect it with the pressing concerns of the day. On the affirmative side, progress deciphering power and stratagems of domination might help other disciplines like community psychology broaden their scope. Through a rigorous analysis of critical scholarship, as reflected in journal publications since the year 1990, we hope to understand better the phenomenon of domination and derive lessons for critical theory itself and for a more critical and interdisciplinary community psychology.

Research objectives and rationale

This research had two major objectives. The first was to study two key constructs, power and action, in a series of critical disciplines. The rationale for this was quite simple: Interdisciplinary collaboration begins with learning what other disciplines have to say about the subject matter of interest. Our reasoning was that by learning about power and action we can begin to link up with disciplines concerned with social change and social justice.

The second objective was to develop a methodology for the study of key concepts in critical disciplines. The rationale was that we needed a methodic and systematic way of approaching a vast area of inquiry. Additionally, the methodology we developed could be expanded to other key terms, thereby contributing to interdisciplinary dialogue in other domains.

Methodology

The production of new knowledge deriving from the confluence of diverse disciplines requires collaboration (Schensul et al., 2004; Stokols et al., 2002). In a sense, the process of interdisciplinary collaboration is akin to the process of collaboration with community members (Nelson, Prilleltensky, & MacGillivray, 2001; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2004). In both cases it is necessary to create a trusting atmosphere where the contributions of all members is sought, valued, promoted, and respected. The principle of inclusion applies in both cases and can be assessed at the beginning of collaborative projects by considering who is present in, and who is absent from, the process. Who has more power and who might be rendered voiceless are also key issues. Close attention to these questions helped us, as authors to develop the right balance between creative tension and collaboration in the process of generating knowledge.

The multi-year interdisciplinary collaborative endeavor that resulted in this article was interdisciplinary both in terms of process and content. We defined our content as interdisciplinary based on our intentional efforts to include journals from a wide group of different disciplines. Our

interdisciplinary process involved intentional efforts to work with our group members' differing perspectives. Over time the group went through several stages wherein interdisciplinary process and content were woven together. First, positive relationships among group members and a common theoretical framework were developed. Next, we developed a common language by clearly defining the concepts of power and social action. Third, we selected a sample of 70 articles from 7 journals in 6 different disciplines for review. Each member scanned a selection of articles for their relevancy to issues of power and social action. The results of this initial review were used in the fourth stage to develop operational criteria for the detailed evaluation of the articles. In the fifth stage each group member applied these criteria to ten articles from one specific journal. Preliminary results of each analysis were presented to the group and, if necessary, evaluation criteria were revised to reflect the lessons learned from the data. The final stage was the discussion of the major findings, reflection on our interdisciplinary process and the composition of this paper. We elaborate below on each phase of the process.

Step 1: Developing relationships and a common theoretical framework

Our group was quite diverse and included one faculty member with a background in community, school-clinical, and critical psychology, plus graduate students with training and experience in community psychology, community research and action, critical psychology, program evaluation, quantitative methods of psychology, applied social psychology, counseling, theology, higher education administration, and sociology. To facilitate the collaborative group process we began by building relationships and by learning about everyone's background, interest, and discussion styles. We also had to develop a common theoretical framework. While we all had the common goal of transformational social change, we did not necessarily approach it with the same theoretical understanding. Prilleltensky's (2003, *in press*) framework of psychopolitical validity was our common denominator and helped to develop a foundational basis for the goal-focused collaborative work that was to follow. Psychopolitical validity is achieved when (a) social science research takes into account the role of power dynamics in social phenomena (epistemic validity) and (b) when efforts are made to address power imbalance and injustice (transformational validity).

Step 2: Finding a common language

The objective of this endeavor was to discern to what degree contemporary critical scholarship across several disciplines addresses issues of power and social action. Using the concept of psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003; *in*

press) allowed us to develop common definitions for power and social action. The different disciplinary backgrounds of the group members helped promote open discussion and an understanding of these concepts from other disciplinary perspectives. For example, one recurring discussion between those with different training centered on whether individual level or small group action effectively challenges institutionalized power structures or the overall dynamics of the status quo. Ultimately we worked to incorporate our different viewpoints into our operationalization of power and social action.

Power as we understand it refers to the capacity and opportunity to fulfill or obstruct personal, relational, or collective needs (Prilleltensky, 2003). Power is often discussed in the context of oppression, which is the effect of actually obstructing others' needs. It is important to note, however, that power to oppress is just one aspect of power. Others are the power to strive for wellness, the power to strive for liberation, and the power to resist oppression. Power is also a relative concept in that people may be oppressed in one context, at a particular time and place, but may act as oppressors at another time or place.

In our definition social action is the intentional effort (e.g., a program) of an individual or a group of people to instigate transformational change in order to overcome internal and external sources of oppression and in order to pursue wellness. In this sense social action is closely related to liberation (see Prilleltensky, 2003). The leverage point of social action can be set at the micro-, the meso-, the macro-level, or at any combination of these.

Step 3: The sample

Journals

The group reviewed seven journals from different disciplines. These journals were selected based on their critical self-understanding, the knowledge of the team about the journal, and their availability to the group (e.g. through personal subscription, library holdings, or availability on the Internet). All of the following descriptions are based on the self-description of these journals either in the journal itself or in their Web presentation. We have listed the journals based on their level of analysis from those that tend to be more micro, a focus on individuals, to those that are more macro, a focus on larger groups and societies.

- *Radical Pedagogy* is a fairly new interdisciplinary online journal that is devoted to the critical analysis of teaching and learning. It was first published in 1999 and appears twice a year.
- *Radical Teacher* is a socialist, feminist, and anti-racist journal on the theory and practice of teaching. The journal started in 1998 and two to three issues are published per year.

- *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*¹ publishes scholarly papers, which provide reflection upon and intervention into theories and practices in psychology, and upon the contribution of critical psychology to the critique of power and ideology. It was first published in 1999 and, as the name suggests, appears annually.
- *Critical Studies in Media Communication* is a forum for cross-disciplinary scholarship treating issues related to mediated communication. Mediated communication includes print and broadcast media, film, video, and new media forms such as the Internet and the World Wide Web. This journal, which was founded in 1984, is published four times a year.
- *The Review of Radical Political Economics* promotes critical inquiry into all areas of economic, social, and political reality including Marxian economics, post-Keynesian economics, Straffian economics, feminist economics, and radical institutional economics. The Review appears quarterly and was first published in 1969.
- *Critical Sociology* publishes articles from various perspectives within a broad definition of critical or radical social science. It has published work mainly within broad boundaries of the Marxist tradition, although it has also been home to post-modern, feminist, and other radical arguments. It started in 1969 (then titled *Insurgent Sociologist*) and is issued two to three times a year.
- *Radical Philosophy* is a critical journal of feminist and socialist philosophy. The purpose of the journal is to provide a forum for debate and discussion of theoretical issues on the left. It was founded in 1972 in the aftermath of the radical student movement in the 1960s and appears six times per annum.

Articles

We used purposeful sampling to obtain the final sample of 70 articles. From each journal 10 articles were chosen spanning the years 1992–2001. If not all of those years were available, we used more articles from the existing years. We purposely preferred those articles that either through their title or their abstract suggested that they address issues of power, oppression, and/or social action. Thus, the actual coverage of the two domains in these journals can be expected to be even less than the ratings in this paper would suggest. There were several reasons for the purposeful sampling of only 10 articles per journal. First, our intention was not to develop a complete census of the journals but rather discover general tendencies

¹ Including a critical psychology perspective is important to presenting a comprehensive assessment of critical scholarship. Although critical psychology has direct relevance to the field of community psychology, it has not yet become a central organizing framework. Many of its basic tenants have yet to be fully incorporated into the field.

in these journals. Second, the goal was to explore several journals from different disciplines rather than to investigate one journal in depth. Third, while we wanted to limit the number to 10 articles we also wanted to make sure that we would find contributions to power and social action in these journals if they existed. That is why we applied purposeful sampling rather than random selection. The articles that were included in the final sample are listed alphabetically by journal title in Appendix A.

Step 4: Evaluation criteria

In order to develop clear and consistent criteria for the concepts of power and social action we used an iterative qualitative categorization process similar to the coding techniques of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). That is, we developed subcategories for the two domains, applied them to selected articles, and revised the categories if necessary until the group felt a saturation point was reached whereby all relevant components of the constructs were covered.

For the domain of power we developed five subcategories. For each of these categories, the respective researcher from the group rated whether the author(s) addressed the categories “not at all” (absent = 0), “only a little” (low = 1), “somewhat” (medium = 2), or to a “satisfying degree” (high = 3). “Only a little” was assigned if an article touched upon issues of either power or social action but did not really address these issues in detail. An article would be rated with “somewhat” if the issues were covered in some more detail but still lacked some important aspects. “Not at all” and “satisfying degree” cover the remaining articles on either end.

The first subcategory is an explicit theory or conceptualization of power (*theory of power*). That is, authors would not only make an implicit reference to the issue of power but also provide their own or somebody else’s explanatory conceptualization of how power operates in the context of the issue the article is addressing. The second subcategory refers to implicit references to theories or conceptualizations of power (*reference of power*). This could be a discussion of power differentials (such as: “One of the reasons people have different levels of health is that they have different levels of power”) but without a theoretical appraisal that tries to explain these power differentials. To what degree articles offered an explicit theory or analysis of oppression was the focus of the third category (*analysis of oppression*). To receive a high rating in this category the author(s) would have to analyze and/or explain oppressive structures, situations, and relationships; they could not simply be described. Description of examples of oppression where the reference to oppression is implicit fell into the fourth subcategory (*examples of oppression*). Finally, if power was considered in the development of an intervention that an article describes

and/or discusses we gave appropriate ratings in the fifth category (*power in interventions*). This last category is a bridge to the social action analysis. If authors discussed social actions, we assessed to what extent was power present in the intervention.

Social action was classified into three major categories, each of which was further subdivided into three subcategories. Each category was rated on a scale from 0 to 3, similar to the rating described for the categories of power. The only difference was that in this case raters could assign a “non-applicable” (N/A) designation if it was evident that social action is not part of the topic the author(s) elaborate(s) in an article. The first major category for social action contains ratings for recommendation for social change that fit our definition (*recommendation for change*). An author, for example, who recommends changes in the organizational structure of a professional society to give more voice and power to groups that have been under-represented, would receive appropriate ratings in this category. Actions for change represent the second major category (*action for change*). That is, the author(s) describe a concrete example of transformative action in practice. This includes diverse activities such as social programs, grass root activities, and other concerted efforts to change institutional or societal policies or power structures (e.g. street demonstrations or strikes). The third category refers to any evidence the author(s) provide(s) on whether the social action was effective in accomplishing its goals and objectives. Such evidence could be the reporting of the results of a formal evaluation or anecdotal accounts of the effectiveness for individual cases. Each of these three major categories was further divided into social actions at the micro-level, meso-level, and/or macro-level. The results of such classification may be seen in Table 2, which describes the results of our analysis.

Step 5: Analysis

Once the evaluation criteria were clearly articulated and the final selection of articles chosen, the final analysis was straightforward. Each member of the group evaluated 10 articles from one journal (if available) on each of the evaluation criteria. One challenge for the group members was to hold the tension between trying to use rigorous quantitative ratings and at the same time be true to the richness and qualitative nature of the data. In this context, it is important to note that the rating scales are only at the ordinal level and serve mainly to provide an orientation to the strengths and weakness of a specific journal. The articles of a specific journal were rated by only one person, which might be considered a limitation. However, the group spent much time developing evaluation criteria that best capture the contributions of critical scholarship in regard to power and social action. The members of the research group agree that the procedure we developed

for evaluating these journals provides important insight into the strength of these journals in addressing the epistemic and transformation concern of critical scholarship. We believe that this methodology could easily be applied to other kinds of relevant questions such as how well community psychology addresses issues of race and gender.

Step 6: Discussing the findings and writing the paper

The results of each individual analysis were summarized in tables to discern trends in these journals. These tables plus illustrative examples were discussed in the group and the major findings elaborated. The outcomes of this process can be found below in the results and discussion sections of this paper.

Results

Our review found that the strengths of each journal form an interdisciplinary collection of characteristics illustrating how scholars address power and action. As described in the methods section, we rated the sample of articles from each journal according to criteria representing power in explanation and intervention, and criteria representing social action. What follows is a brief description of how each journal addresses the criteria for power and social action.

Power

Table 1 summarizes the level, or average score, at which each journal meets criteria for addressing power. Overall, journals are strongest in including explicit and implicit references to a theory of power in their articles. Analysis and examples of oppression are less often discussed in articles. References to power in interventions are the least represented criterion within the sampled articles.

Power in explanation

Several articles in our sample frame power as multidimensional and use power to explain or offer insights into mechanisms of domination, exploitation, resistance and struggle occurring within class-based dynamics. *Radical Political Economics* contributors share a background in Marxist theory, but seek a concrete understanding of the power dynamics involved in capitalist production as they figure into everyday life. A sample of articles from *Radical Political Economics* reveals strong representations of institutionalized power and mechanisms capable of producing systemic social change, including, for example, labor organizing, community financial reinvestment strategies, and deindustrialization. These are examples of how authors of this journal study power and potential means to subvert the status quo through

Table 1 “Power” ratings for each journal

Criteria	0 Absent	1 Low	2 Medium	3 High
Explicit theory of power	Critical Sociology	Annual Review of CP	Critical Studies in Media Radical Political Econ Radical Pedagogy Radical Philosophy Radical Teacher Annual Review of CP	Radical Political Econ
Implicit reference to theory of power			Critical Studies in Media Critical Sociology Radical Pedagogy Radical Philosophy Radical Teacher	
Analysis of oppression	Critical Sociology	Critical Studies in Media	Annual Review of CP Radical Political Econ Radical Pedagogy Radical Philosophy Radical Teacher	
Examples of oppression		Critical Studies in Media Radical Pedagogy	Critical Sociology Radical Philosophy Radical Political Econ Radical Teacher	Annual Review of CP
Power in interventions		Annual Review of CP Critical Studies in Media Critical Sociology Radical Philosophy Radical Political Econ	Radical Teacher Radical Pedagogy	

organizing and alternative investment strategies. *Radical Political Economics* authors often attempt to explain or offer insights into mechanisms of domination, exploitation, resistance and struggle occurring within class-based dynamics. These findings seem consistent with the political economy analytical scheme in general, which tends to offer detailed description of the structure and functioning of capitalism, including its exploitative tendencies.

Another strong example of defining power comes from implicit references to oppression in an article from the *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*. Kitzinger’s (1999) central theme focuses on the oppression of people who are lesbian or gay and their life vicissitudes vis-a-vis power structures and struggles. She demonstrates that under the current understanding of critical psychology, lesbian and gay psychology would not be considered critical. She explains that many researchers who are lesbian or gay seemingly remain in the empiricist tradition but that there is also a good practical (power struggle related) reason for it. This is an example of how to use empirical data for transformational purposes. Thompson (2000) also provides references to oppression by examining Boal’s theatre of the oppressed in a UK prison.

Besides the few strong references stated above, power remains an under-defined concept in many of the jour-

nals in this study. We found that explicit attempts to reference specific theories of power or conceptualizations of power are missing (i.e. *Critical Sociology*); or theories of power are poorly presented for the reader (i.e. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*). However, for some authors, it is clear that power is part of their theoretical thinking (Theo, 1999; Mora, 1999). Explicit references to power, however, are either presented in very philosophical and pseudo-intellectual terminology (Newman, 1999) or mentioned as part of a discussion involving other works, such as Foucault (Bird, 1999).

Articles in this sample were more likely to implicitly reference conceptualizations of power. This is apparent in *Critical Sociology*, where Ralph Armruster argues in the article “Cross-National Labor Organizing Strategies” (1995) that new cross-national labor organizing strategies are needed in an increasingly globalized world economy in order to improve global working conditions and living standards. Based on his analysis, he comes up with a combination of strategies that has proved most successful in movements under similar conditions. Implicit in his case study is a question of power and how movements must address social issues through the examination of such strategies as covert/discreet organizing, community-labor coalitions, media campaigns, etc. Although this example closely examines the political climate

in which movements must thrive, power is not specifically conceptualized.

We found that *Radical Philosophy* is strong in reuniting the arguably arbitrarily separated domains of wellness (personal, relational, collective) within a power paradigm and, at times, makes recommendations for action. In *Critical Studies in Media Communication* the authors often cite the economic power of commercial interests in the media. There are discussions of how power affects which topics are reported and the ways in which they are reported.

The exploitive tendencies of commercial interests and corporate power are frequently part of the narrative in our review of journal articles. In *Radical Teacher* and *Radical Pedagogy*, many articles deal with the unfortunate power that corporations, institutions, and politics wield in systems of education and in the world at large (Falsify, 2002; Fox, 2001; Sweeney & Fled, 1999). These authors are concerned with the corporatizing of schools both in their organizational paradigm and consumerist content – a concern shared in *Radical Political Economics*.

In addition, several authors in the articles sampled address institutional hierarchies, oppressive policies, and intra-organizational inequities. *Radical Political Economics* frequently includes analyses located within relationships of employment and interconnects social power dynamics, such as race and gender. In *Radical Teacher* and *Radical Pedagogy* several of the articles sampled deal with issues of power in the classroom (Cavalcanti, 2001; Chawl & Rodrigue, 2001; Rypstat, 2002; Walcott, 2001). These articles aptly address the delicate balance that faculty members strive for as they attempt to structure a learning experience that both honors the experience of students and creates a structure for a type of learning process that transforms the basic assumptions through which they understand their experiences (see Mezirow, 1997).

Power in intervention

Most striking in our review of these journals is the lack of attention to interventions that address the negative effects of power. While most articles in the sampled journals acknowledge how power inequities impact well-being, few address the need to make this the target of interventions. In *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, power is used mostly in explanation of phenomena and not in interventions, despite the considered ability and opportunity of journalists to shape public opinion. In *Radical Philosophy*, power in intervention has less relevance to the subject matter. In the *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, Estrada and Botero (2000) present results from a solidarity-based intervention that helps women to work toward reducing their oppression.

Although power in intervention is largely absent in our sample, a few good examples did appear such as Arm-

bruster's (1995) case study of cross-national labor organizing strategies as discussed previously. Armbruster's (1995) analysis in *Critical Sociology* suggests an action plan based on strategies in other successfully social movements at the end of the article. However, because intervention is so lightly touched upon and the treatment of power is often implicit, "power in intervention" was coded as "low" for this journal.

Radical Teacher and *Radical Pedagogy* score the highest of all journals for including interventions that address issues of power in social problems. This is mainly due the fact that these journals are explicitly focused on teaching as an intervention for social change. Discussions of interventions in these two journals mainly come in the form of conscientization (Freire, 1993). Many articles in this review suggest that, by creating environments where students can become aware of power inequities and openly reflect on the power differentials in the educational system, they are providing a powerful intervention against social problems by creating knowledgeable and critical citizens. Transformational education is the intervention that addresses power by making young people aware of socio-political forces and highlighting their roles in maintaining or potentially challenging injustice. In teacher education, the focus is on helping new teachers learn from students and thereby making small steps toward changing oppressive practices in the classroom with the hope that these small interventions can lead to larger transformations within the system (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Social action

Table 2 summarizes the criteria used to describe social action within each journal. Similar to criteria used in describing power, ratings represent low, medium, and high levels of attention to recommendations for action and change. We also subdivided the analysis on micro, meso, and macro levels of social action. Overall, journals are less likely to discuss recommendations for change, actions that lead to change, or evidence of the effectiveness of any action than to discuss issues of power. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that while there were some recommendations for action at the meso and macro levels, actual actions were low in the three levels of analysis (micro, meso and macro) and evidence of effectiveness was nearly absent at all three levels.

Recommendations and actions for change

Although we did find that several articles made recommendations for change, notably absent from the vast majority of journals we sampled are articles that: (a) reflect on specific interventions, (b) call for and identify concrete intervention strategies, or (c) outline effective approaches. Only three of the articles sampled from the review of *Radical Political Economics* analyze or offer pragmatic real world

Table 2 “Action” ratings for each journal

Criteria	0 Absent	1 Low	2 Medium	3 High
Recs for change at Micro levels	Critical Studies in Media	Annual Review of CP		Radical Pedagogy
	Radical Political Econ	Critical Sociology Radical Philosophy		Radical Teacher
Meso levels	Radical Philosophy	Annual Review of CP Critical Sociology Radical Political Econ	Critical Studies in Media Radical Pedagogy Radical Teacher	
Macro levels	Critical Sociology	Critical Studies in Media Radical Philosophy Radical Teacher	Annual Review of CP Radical Political Econ Radical Pedagogy Radical Philosophy	
Actions for change at Micro levels	Radical Political Econ	Annual Review of CP	Radical Philosophy	
		Critical Studies in Media Critical Sociology Radical Pedagogy Radical Teacher		
Meso levels	Radical Philosophy Radical Political Econ	Annual Review of CP Critical Studies in Media Critical Sociology Radical Pedagogy Radical Teacher		
	Critical Studies in Media Critical Sociology	Annual Review of CP Radical Political Econ Radical Pedagogy Radical Philosophy Radical Teacher		
Evidence of effectiveness at Micro levels	Critical Studies in Media	Annual Review of CP		
	Critical Sociology Radical Philosophy Radical Political Econ	Radical Pedagogy Radical Teacher		
Meso levels	Annual Review of CP Radical Philosophy Radical Political Econ	Critical Studies in Media Critical Sociology Radical Pedagogy Radical Teacher		
	Annual Review of CP Critical Studies in Media	Radical Political Econ Radical Pedagogy Radical Teacher		
Macro levels	Critical Sociology Radical Philosophy			

strategies for change. Lacking in the review of *Radical Political Economics* scheme is fuller consideration of how power dynamics impact wellness, relationships between individuals, and/or how individuals and their communities may function as agents toward the promotion of social change.

Radical Philosophy is expressly committed to supporting social change. This is evident in a number of articles that critique the theory-action divide, as well as those that suggest implications of particular philosophies for social action. However, recommended action typically involves further theory development. Similarly, in *Critical Studies in Media Communications*, only 2 of the 10 arti-

cles reviewed have some kind of action component. Most of the suggestions have to do with theory development. There was very little discussion about real world interventions in policy, practice, or programming. Most recommendations focused on more research, not more action. The most applied implications had to do with teaching journalism.

The focus on teaching as action was obviously present in *Radical Pedagogy and Radical Teacher*. Most of the recommendations focused on changing the dynamics of the classroom or being intentional in course design and implementation to provide opportunities for students to become aware of

the complexities of social issues. There was also some mention of the need for structures that help to provide teachers with opportunities to reflect on their teaching practices, especially as young teachers are being trained (Attwood & Seale-Collazo, 2002). These recommendations would generally be considered ameliorative by the more radical faction of this discipline who would suggest that reforming practices within the oppressive system is not enough, and that efforts to transform the system is what is required (Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001; McLaren, 1998; McLaren & NetLibrary Inc., 2002). Only Dennis Fox (2001) provided examples of organized attempts to fight corporatization and the de-democratization of public schools. Fox (2001) also included a discussion of how radicals can work with larger liberal groups without diluting the desired ends.

Some of the articles selected from *Critical Sociology* do contain recommendations for social action. While the average article from this journal contains unstated or lightly touched upon implications for further social action, at least one per year focuses on directly stated recommendations for social action. In fact, when the name and scope of the journal changed in 1988, its editorial board explicitly reiterated its commitment to activist-oriented sociology. Into the 1990s, articles routinely appear in the journal that critique modes of discourse that are disconnected from action (e.g. postmodernism).

The central topic of *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* in 1999 is "Action Research". Despite the overt theme addressing social action, none of the articles leaves you with a clear understanding of how to do social change. Also, none of the action research articles were published together with participants even though they often have a participatory or even emancipatory understanding. The few articles that actually introduce critical practice do not adequately explain the nature of change. For example, Theo (1999) only indirectly stresses that using theoretical tools to understand the structures of oppression should be an important part of practice. Kitzinger (1999) provides a nice theoretical critique, however she does not address how to change current power structures. In the 2000 volume, studies present some concrete suggestions for action (Estrada & Botero, 2000; Kagan & Burton, 2000; Thompson, 2000). However, the overall ratings for *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* are ranked "low" or "absent" for all criteria except for addressing recommendations for change at the macro level which received a "medium" score.

In summary, our systematic review helps to evaluate the holes that exist in the critical literature regarding power and action. Although the journals provide only one sample of the critical literature, it is clear that the research literature is better at discussing theory of power than actions that transform power. The overall weakness we found in this review is cogently expressed by Celia Kitzinger (1999) in her cri-

tique of critical psychology. Her perspective may serve as an adequate critique for many of the journals sampled here.

I am simply pointing out that, for all its emancipatory rhetoric, critical psychology has not offered many specific concrete examples of the political utility, in practice, of (say) a given piece of discursive research: instead, it has tended to pursue discursive (and similar) research while parenthetically acknowledging the political utility of positivist and essentialist research on the same topic and expressing a willingness to collude with it in the interests of promoting particular political goals (Kitzinger, 1999, p. 63).

As reported in Tables 1 and 2, the average scores for sampled articles are primarily ranked "medium" for their adequacy of including explicit and implicit theories of power and "low" for including any mention of power in interventions. The trend of neglecting interventions continues in our assessment of action. We found that the majority of journals are ranked "low" or "absent" for their adequacy to discuss recommendations for change, actions for change, and evidence of effectiveness of these actions. As mentioned earlier, it is perhaps easier to analyze, critique or deconstruct power dynamics and leave the creation of new ideas for social action to others.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this paper was to inform a more critical community psychology using an interdisciplinary approach in both process and content to synthesizing concepts of power and action shared with other critical scholarship. Through an analysis of power and action we examined the extent to which seven leading "critical school" journals offer a transformative and epistemic challenge to the status quo, a concern shared by many community psychologists. We drew on Prilleltensky's (2003) constructions of power (defined as the capacity to fulfill or obstruct personal, relational, or collective needs) and social action (defined as the intentional effort of an individual or group of people to instigate transformational change in order to overcome internal and external sources of oppression and pursue wellness) to investigate the degree to which critical scholarship from different disciplines utilizes these two concepts. The methodology applied in this study built upon Prilleltensky's (2003) work and was developed by a team of collaborators from six different disciplines. The collaborative and reflective research process benefited from positive relationships among group members, skillful facilitation, and the co-construction of a common language and conceptual framework. Ten central domains of power and action were identified that we understood to be integral within critical theory and importantly

linked to individual level agency and the broader relational and collective processes of transformational change.

Overall we found that these journals are strongest in including explicit and implicit references to a theory of power in their articles and less so in addressing issues of action. While power is found to be an important concept in the critical disciplines, it too remains an underdeveloped construct, lacking clear definitions of power, limited analysis and examples of oppression, and scant attention to power in interventions. In addition, action recommendations for change, actions that lead to change or evidence of the effectiveness of any action are largely ignored in the journals we examined. Our findings are consistent with the assertion that critical theory has focused more on issues of deconstruction than construction or reconstruction. In short, we find that critical scholarship is challenging of the status quo at the theoretical level, but often fails to extend theory into action for social change.

What does critical scholarship have to offer to community psychology?

To some extent, community psychology already embraces critical theory tenets, but it does so in diluted form (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Prilleltensky, *in press*). There are four foci in critical theory that can deepen and invigorate community psychology's commitment to transformative and epistemic concerns.

First, critical theory focuses on the role of power and domination in explaining and transforming human phenomena. Long a concern of community psychology, empowerment refers to people's perceptions of control over their lives and their actual capacity to effect change. To the growing literature on empowerment, critical theory can contribute the role of ideology, culture, and mass communication in generating powerlessness in the first place. Detailed studies of cultural discourses demonstrate not only how people are made to feel helpless but also how they buy into an ideology that is ultimately inimical to their own well-being (Lewis, 1999). Whereas community psychology deals with people's perceptions of control mostly in the proximal and present environment, critical theory contributes the role of more distal and historical forces such as the economy, urban planning, politics, culture and language. The work of Danish urban planner Bent Flyvbjerg (1998, 2001) on planning, rationality and power illustrates the application of critical theory to urban and community development. Flyvbjerg examines power not so much as a personal characteristic or perception, but as a dynamic of strategies and tactics operating in micro, meso, and macro structures.

Second, critical theory offers a method of perpetual scrutiny that averts cooptation. Authors have argued that this perpetual role serves a useful function against the dilu-

tion of critique and the risk of acquiescence (Peters et al., 2003a, b). We can see in community psychology how the trajectory of prevention went from calls for radical social change to detailed analysis of risk and protective factors at the micro level (Albee, 1996). Critical theory offers an antidote to cooptation because it understands how the status quo maintains itself by absorbing sanitized elements of opposition into the mainstream while extirpating its radical seeds (Prilleltensky, 1994).

Third, critical theory also sustains a perpetual critique of professional and theoretical assumptions inherent in academic practices. By locating the role of professionals in socio-historical context, it can address existential questions such as how community development and mental health workers assuage legitimate and popular discontent by offering humane help. While ameliorative approaches are needed to soothe the wounds of oppression, they can paradoxically thwart the thrust toward the elimination of the root causes of the problem. The vast majority of community development and mental health workers, to pick two sectors of many in health and human services, devote most of their time reacting to injustice and lack of caring, not to the promotion of social change (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002).

Fourth, critical theory is housed in multiple disciplines. As a school of thought that applies to multiple disciplines, critical theory has the advantage of looking at phenomena from various perspectives. There is a lesson here for community psychology. If we can identify the common denominators that unite us with other disciplines, we can feel at home in many houses, and not just in community psychology departments. Critical psychology benefits from its residence in multiple disciplines, and so might community psychology. This is a built in antidote against intellectual parochialism and single level explanations of phenomena. Critical psychology draws from macro economics, sociology, political science, and pedagogy, benefiting from both the academic knowledge and practice elements emerging from these fields.

Based on the findings from our review of 6 different disciplinary journals, we believe that community psychology has both an opportunity to learn important lessons from critical scholarship while potentially advancing the aims of critical theory as well. This action orientation is an extremely important facet in the transformational goal of community psychology. However, the *types* of action recommended in community psychology journals are often less threatening to the status quo than actions that might stem from the more radical critical journals. We suggest that the field of community psychology usefully contribute key insights regarding directives for action, while simultaneously broadening its critique of the status quo through greater inclusion of critical theory. One way to do this is through the adoption of psychopolitical validity in research and action (Prilleltensky, 2003, *in*

press). Psychopolitical validity explicitly calls for the examination of power dynamics in psychological and political processes affecting oppression, liberation, and well-being. Epistemic and transformative psychopolitical validity offer, respectively, criteria for making community psychology research more critical of the status quo, and interventions more friendly of social change.

Critical theory can offer community psychology a view of the more distal and historical forces of oppression such as the economy, politics, culture and language. While community psychology research largely examines micro-level perceptions of control, an incorporation of this broader view of constraining structures would add much to our understanding of types of actions that are necessary to address the roots of oppression. Examined together, multilevel explanations of phenomena can offer community psychology a greater understanding of how oppression works, which can then lend more power to action initiatives.

In addition, listening to interdisciplinary perspectives on problems of oppression can help community psychology link with other disciplines that are already looking at macro-level explanations of oppression. Often in disciplines such as sociology and economics, macro-level explanations exist alone; they stand without the benefit of links to micro-level explanations. Pulling together findings across disciplines can help us develop a patchwork of understandings at multiple levels of analysis. As with most interdisciplinary work, and as evidenced by the process through which this paper evolved however, we are mindful of the fact that interdisciplinary collaboration requires patience, important attention to the less tangibly evident elements of process, and in many important ways is nascent in its development. Nonetheless, the outcomes achieved from such endeavors can be well worth the effort. We hope that our process and content findings serve to further interdisciplinary dialogue among community psychology and sister disciplines involved in the struggle for social justice.

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