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Commentary

Meaning-making, mattering, and thriving in community psychology: From co-optation to amelioration and transformation

La adquisición de significado, valoración y prosperidad en la psicología comunitaria: de la cooptación a la mejora y la transformación

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Community psychology is not a monolithic entity. While united by a set of values, theories, and principles, researchers and practitioners around the world engage in multifarious activities in the name of community psychology. Given that community needs vary greatly around the world, this is expected. United by the pursuit of meaning, mattering and thriving, community psychologists adopt diverse approaches in diverse contexts. In this paper I wish to capture the relationships among meaning-making, mattering and thriving, and to offer a continuum that goes from co-optation to transformation, with amelioration as its center point. As I do so, I will draw on the papers published in this special issue to illustrate the principles that unite us, the risks that beset us, and the promises that excite us.

Meaning-Making, Mattering, and Thriving

I wish to propose that human beings engage in meaning-making through their struggles to matter and to thrive (Frankl, 2006). Meaning-making positions human beings as agents of personal and collective change. People make meaning in different ways obviously, but I want to suggest that most of these ways revolve around mattering and thriving, which entail fairness and wellness, respectively (Prilleltensky, 2012). There is a lot of evidence that people will go to great lengths to pursue fairness for themselves, their loved ones, their communities, and their countries (Corning, 2011; Greene, 2013; Sun, 2013). This is a sign of the power of mattering. Similarly, there are many indications that people will strive to achieve wellness in various domains of life – a clear indication of the struggle to thrive (Buettner, 2010; Segall & Fries, 2011). I submit that for many people, the struggle for mattering and thriving is what makes life worth living. The reason I have confidence in this hypothesis is that mattering and fairness on one hand (Greene, 2013; Sun, 2013), and thriving and wellness on the other (Prilleltensky et al., in press; Rath & Harter, 2010), encompass a wide array of human activity. To further my claim, I will briefly elaborate on the many faces of mattering and thriving.

Mattering is fundamentally about the feeling that you count, and that you are important (Schlossberg, 1989; Taylor & Turner, 2001). Phenomenologically, this may be experienced as a feeling that "I matter." Mattering can be broken down into two essential moments: recognition and impact. The moment of recognition refers to signals we receive from the world that our presence matters, that what we have to say has meaning and that we are acknowledged in the room, in our family, at work, and in the community at large. The moment of impact, in turn, refers to our sense of agency; that what we do makes a difference in the world and that other people depend on us.

Each one of these two moments exists along a continuum. The moment of recognition has at one end a sense of entitlement and at the other a feeling of invisibility. Neither extreme is healthy for personal or collective well-being. We need to feel recognized, acknowledged, and appreciated in good measure, without demanding too much attention or privilege at the expense of others. At the same time, we must avoid the feeling of invisibility, which plagues so many minorities and oppressed communities. Feeling ignored, neglected, and forgotten is a terrible violation of a psychological human right. Let me suggest then that we must struggle to find the happy medium of recognition. This is fundamentally a question of justice and fairness, which I will address after we attend to the continuum of impact.

Impact refers to making a difference in the world. In psychological parlance, we often refer to it as self-efficacy, or the feeling that we are capable of making a difference, mastering a new skill, and influencing the course of events in our lives and in the world. We feel that we matter when we can make a difference. Two extremes threaten the health of mattering: domination and helplessness. While the former signals a need for complete control over the environment and other people, the latter refers to powerlessness and the inability to make a difference. In helplessness, no matter what we do or think, we feel doomed.

Recognition and impact, the two branches of mattering, emanate from principles of justice and practices of fairness. For the purpose of this essay, I will refer to justice as a series of principles, and fairness as a set of practices meant to enact precepts of justice. Viewed this way, recognition is part of demanding what is due a person, a classic instance of distributive justice. In this case, what is

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due may be a subjective good, such as attention, acknowledgement, or respect; or an objective good, such as health insurance, or educational resources, such as books and computers. In this vein, a person may feel recognized to the extent that he or she is the recipient of subjective or objective goods that are due him or her through the enactment of fair practices in society.

Impact, the second branch of mattering, is also a matter of justice. While recognition reflects the moment of getting attention, respect, and dignity, impact reflects the moment of doing and acting on the world. Here also we can talk about impact as a matter of justice. If we think about the right to vote, it is a matter of justice to give men and women equal opportunities to elect officials. Both have the right to express their opinion. In this case we can talk about voting as the legitimate due of both men and women. Whereas distributive justice refers primarily to the fair allocation of goods and obligations, procedural justice refers to fair processes. Voting is an expression of procedural justice. Giving people a voice in matters that affect their lives is an act of fairness.

Thus, principles of distributive and procedural justice, and their corresponding practices of fairness, play a role in mattering through the moments of recognition and impact. Whereas distributive and procedural justice may be called *substantive* forms of justice, they are enacted in various *situational* forms of justice, such as interpersonal relations, occupational settings, community contexts, and policy arenas. In workplaces for instance, people may feel recognized or ignored, helpless or influential, valued or forgotten. The same goes for entire groups of people who feel their rights have been forgotten, such as many people with disabilities around the world. When taken as a whole, the struggle for substantive forms of justice in diverse situations makes it clear that mattering, through recognition and impact, is a consequential motivator of human behavior. Community psychologists are right in aligning themselves with the struggles of oppressed minorities, for their pursuit of meaning-making is tied to their struggle for mattering.

The second pillar of meaning-making, in my view, is the pursuit of thriving (Buettner, 2010; Seligman, 2011). This is the quest for well-being that also propels so much action in humans. Well-being, or wellness, is a multidimensional construct encompassing interpersonal, community, occupational, psychological, physical, and economic domains (Prilleltensky et al., in press). People always strive to improve their lot in one or more of these domains of life. Having enough money, harmonious relationships, friendly communities, little stress, vitality, and a good job are goals that many of us share. Community psychologists are well justified in investing time, resources, and expertise in advancing well-being in these domains with partners throughout the world. As a profession, we are responding to valid and pressing human concerns.

The present special issue of *Psychosocial Intervention* demonstrates community psychology's commitment to advance meaning-making, mattering, and thriving. The work by Balcazar and colleagues with people with disabilities focuses on occupational well-being, whereas the work of Genkova, Trickett, and Birman on immigration concentrates on family, social, and psychological well-being of émigrés from the former Soviet Union. Sabina, Cuevas, and Lannen deal with interpersonal, psychological, and physical well-being of Latino Women following interpersonal victimization. Finally, the work of Worton and colleagues on the Better Beginnings Better Futures is an exemplary ecological community intervention promoting psychological, educational, social, and physical well-being of children.

Contributions to the special issue also deal with mattering and social justice issues. Hernández Plaza and colleagues address asymmetrical power relations in regards to access to maternal-child healthcare for marginalized communities. Here is a prime example of distributive injustice in allocation of goods and services. Two papers deal quite explicitly with procedural justice questions. The

work by de Freitas and collaborators documents international approaches to include minorities and migrants in the process of creating health policies. The challenges and successes of doing so in a variety of European countries reminds us of how hard it is to create sustainable and engaging processes, and how rewarding it can be when they afford authentic voice to marginalized groups. The work of McAuliff and her group attempts to give voice to consumers of a new managed care initiative in Illinois. While the effort to collect data from marginalized communities is commendable, it is not unproblematic. In some instances, collecting data for a program, without challenging the program, may be seen as a form of co-optation, a risk faced as well by the work of Balcazar and colleagues on tacitly supporting an entrepreneurship model for people with disabilities. While generating employment for people with disabilities is vitally important, uncritically endorsing an entrepreneurship model is risky (Armstrong, 2005). Both of these cases raise the specter of co-optation, which leads us to the next section.

Co-optation, Amelioration, and Transformation

The relationship between community psychology interventions and unjust systemic structures may be organized along a continuum. On one end of the continuum there is the risk of co-optation, leading to the possibility of aligning ourselves, however unwittingly, with conservative forces. Co-optation comes in many forms (Baur & Schmitz, 2012; Coy & Hedeen, 2005; Gray, 2010). One form is adopting methods without the social critique. Another form is changing the system only minimally to silence dissent while maintaining fundamental inequities intact. A third way is to change the language without changing the system. Thus, many programs embrace the idiom of empowerment without really giving much voice and choice to people who need it most. Advancing wellness without fairness dilutes the mission of community psychology and exposes our discipline to the risk of acquiescence (Prilleltensky, 2012). We might argue that co-optation is not a desirable outcome of community psychology interventions, unless the co-optation is strategic and temporary and might lead to transformative efforts in the long run.

Some papers in this special issue walk a fine line between augmenting the voice of marginalized communities and buying into neoliberal, individualistic, and rather conservative approaches to well-being. The paper on an empowerment model of entrepreneurship for people with disabilities (Balcazar et al., this issue) does not challenge at all the entrepreneurship model of upward mobility (Armstrong, 2005), or its likelihood of success, which is very much limited (Surowiecki, 2014). This model believes that anyone can create a business, generate jobs, and achieve the "American dream," without much regard for social and economic conditions. It is a model built on personal drive, motivation, achievement, optimism, and individual pursuit, which are not necessarily negative attributes, unless they cloud the social context of inequality, which the entrepreneurship model does.

Another paper that draws attention to the issue of co-optation concerns the perspectives of consumers on the Illinois Integrated Care Pilot (McAuliff et al., this issue). The paper details the empowering and disempowering aspects of the new program, but does not necessarily challenge the unjust nature of a system of care that excludes so many people from accessing the help they need. While listening to consumers is an act of procedural justice, neglecting the larger distributive justice question is a serious omission. On the face of it, there is nothing wrong and many good things about consulting with users of services, but doing so without challenging the unjust structures of health care put in place without consultation with consumers in the first place might be seen as co-optation.

Although Hernández Plaza and her collaborators do not expand on it, they hint at the fact that cultural competencies on the part of health care professionals cannot do much in the face of systemic discrimination (this issue). This is a useful reminder that attention to some practices, such as cultural competence, can be very good on one hand and distracting on the other. If cultural competence is not accompanied by strategies to challenge the system of oppression it can become a controversial practice, which is what I think the authors were trying to say in their paper on inequalities in maternal-child healthcare.

I, as a community psychologist, I'm not immune to this risk myself and I do not want to convey an illusion that I'm beyond it by critiquing other people's work. My goal is to sensitize all of us to the risks involved in getting too close to institutional structures that reward some of our skills as researchers while suppressing others, such as change agents. This is a reality that many of us in community psychology contend with (Burton, 2013). We aim to transform society, but sometimes we get too close for comfort with rigid institutional structures, and instead of challenging oppressive structures we settle for amelioration, which is, in my view, the biggest field of operation of our discipline.

Along with other colleagues, I have used in the past the heuristic of *amelioration-transformation* to draw attention to the distinction between working within the system (amelioration) and changing the system itself (transformation) (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Using the language of wellness and fairness, we might say that improving wellness without improving fairness is ameliorative work because, in the end, the unjust social conditions that led to the problems in the first place remain unaltered. While this heuristic is familiar to community psychologists and builds on the notions of first and second order change, I now believe that the dichotomous portrayal of amelioration vs. transformation, or first vs. second order change does not accurately reflect the complex nature of systemic change (Burton, 2013; Nelson, 2013). In my view, it would be better to conceptualize change along a continuum with many gradients, as opposed to thinking about it in a dichotomous way. In the present special issue, there is ample material to debate what is ameliorative, what is transformative, and what lies in between these two practices. For example, the efforts described by de Freitas and colleagues (this issue) to transform social policies promises to go beyond amelioration but we are not certain what the final outcomes of these efforts will be, and what social structures will be radically altered as a result of the work. In the case of the Better Beginnings Better Futures, the authors claim that the project is well aligned with social justice, but most of the description is around well-being. No one can doubt that the project in Ontario has had major policy and practice implications that have improved the well-being of children and families in the communities, but more conceptual work needs to be done on the amelioration-transformation continuum to appreciate the systemic impact of this terrific project (Worton et al., this issue).

As a collection of papers, it seems to me that the majority of the work described in this special issue falls under the category of amelioration, in the sense that through research or interventions, they all strive to improve well-being but not necessarily challenge the status quo. Most of them also aim to transform systems of inequality, but that remains somewhat of an aspirational goal. I actually think that this sample of papers may be representative of the field of community psychology: we do mostly ameliorative work, we hope to do transformative work, and in some instances we even fall prey to co-optation. Some of the work described here and in other community psychology outlets is inspiring, provocative, and beneficial to many people. To what extent it is socially transformational it is not clear to me. The reason it is not clear, I think, is because we do not yet have adequate definitions of what transformation looks like on the ground. Conceptually, we know that instituting

redistributive policies to help poor people, for example, can be massively transformative, but in the actual day to day work we do not know quite yet how to detect the transformational value of some interventions. While the task of mapping the amelioration-transformation continuum is beyond the scope of this discussion, I think it is worth the intellectual investment. I think it would be good to develop an ecological and multidimensional hierarchy of interventions along the continuum of social change. Some of the dimensions worth including in such ladder are ecological levels impacted (personal, family, workplace, community, etc.), domains of life covered (social, physical, psychological, economic, etc.), time horizon (short term, long term), sustainability of intervention (temporary, institutionalized, inscribed in legislation), development of consciousness-raising (from political helplessness to critical analysis to strategic thinking), and power imbalance (has power structure remained the same? has it been altered?). Another way to think about this continuum of amelioration-transformation is to ask the What, Who, When, Why and How of transformation. I think that systematizing an evaluation protocol for the transformative value of research and action in community psychology will go a long way in both clarifying the value of what we do, and pushing the field forward towards more effective interventions for meaning-making, mattering, and thriving.

I have made an attempt to tackle an aspect of this challenge, namely the power imbalance, through the construct of psychopolitical validity. Epistemic psychopolitical validity refers to the role of power and injustice in explaining psychosocial phenomena of interest to community psychologists. Transformative psychopolitical validity, in turn, refers to changes in the balance of power to foster distributive and procedural justice (Prilleltensky, 2008). Raising awareness about the need to address power differences, as Hernández Plaza and colleagues do in the special issue, is an important step in pairing wellness with fairness and mattering with thriving. Pairing wellness with fairness brings attention to the nexus between thriving and mattering.

Let me be clear though that no one owns the term transformation, and some practitioners and researchers may claim that their work is indeed transformational. The problem is that for some, transformation is happening only at the individual level, not at the systemic level. Then, as I suggest above, it may be that the construct of transformation needs to be further refined for more precision. It may be possible to talk about individual transformation or group transformation, without necessarily policy or social transformation. That may be a more accurate way to describe some interventions. For instance, the Better Beginnings Better Futures project may be a powerful individual, school, or community transformation tool, without necessarily generating social transformation and social justice at the provincial level.

If we circumscribe transformation to a specific ecological level (individual, family, workplace, etc.) and within a particular domain of life (physical health, mental health, occupational well-being, etc.), we may develop a more precise language for transformation. That way of thinking may do justice to the transformational efforts of many community psychologists, without creating the illusion that everything we call transformation is systems change. I invite community psychologists to debate the usefulness of this proposal.

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