

Commentary

Understanding, Resisting, and Overcoming Oppression: Toward Psychopolitical Validity

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My first objective in this paper is to synthesize, synoptically, the literature on oppression and liberation with the contributions to this special issue. To fulfil this aim I introduce a framework for understanding, resisting, and overcoming oppression. The framework consists of psychopolitical well-being; experiences, consequences, and sources of oppression; and actions toward liberation. Each of these components is subdivided into 3 domains of oppression and well-being: collective, relational, and personal. Experiences of suffering as well as resistance and agency are part of the framework. My second objective is to offer ways of closing the gap between research and action on oppression and liberation. To do so I suggest 2 types of *psychopolitical validity*: *epistemic* and *transformative*.

KEY WORDS: political validity; oppression; community interventions; resistance.

We know a great deal about the sources and dynamics of oppression. We are also quite knowledgeable about processes of empowerment and liberation. Now we need to find ways of integrating this knowledge into research and action. To that effect, I suggest in this paper that we adopt the concept of *psychopolitical validity*. My case consists of two parts. In the first part I conduct a synoptic review of primary lessons on oppression and liberation. I will try to synthesize in telegraphic form the contributions to this special issue with previous research in the field. The second part of my case deals with the challenge to integrate the information we possess into research and action in community psychology.

LESSONS

Contributors to the special issue concur that oppression entails (a) *state* and *process*, (b) *psychological* and *political* aspects, and (c) *victimization* as well

as *agency* and *resistance*. Following from these concepts, oppression can be defined as a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, whereby the controlling person or group exercise its power by processes of political exclusion and violence and by psychological dynamics of deprecation. It is only when the oppressed attain a certain degree of conscientization that mechanisms of resistance take place (cf. Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994, 1996; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002).

Table I provides a synopsis of what we have learned about oppression, liberation, and psychopolitical well-being. On the left-hand column we see the values required for psychological and political well-being. Oppression deprives individuals and collectives of these rights, whereas liberation promotes their recovery. Liberation, then, is the process of resisting oppressive forces and striving toward psychological and political well-being. A brief summary of actions toward liberation is presented on the right-hand column of Table I. The framework presented in Table I builds on the contributions to this special issue and on previous efforts to foster a cycle of praxis in community psychology (Prilleltensky, 1999, 2001). I review below the main sections of the framework.

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Table I. Understanding, Resisting, and Overcoming Oppression

Psychopolitical well-being: domains and values for liberation	Experiences: voices and expressions of oppression and resistance	Consequences: outcomes of health and social science studies on oppression	Sources: roots of suffering and oppression	Change: actions toward liberation
Collective Social justice Institutions that support emancipation and human development Peace Protection of environment	Suffering Insecurity and exploitation Denial of collective rights Deprecation of own culture Disregard for environment Resistance Collective action to help community. Each community reacts differently to its own oppression	Suffering Economic disadvantage and discrimination Vulnerability to disadvantage, illness, and disability Fragmentation within oppressed Reduced opportunities in life Resistance Development of activist groups within schools and communities	Economic exploitation Globalization, colonialism, and power differentials Corrupt government structures Sexism and norms of violence Material and ideological domination, political exclusion	Invest in human and environmental development and health Resist dominant theory that economic growth is main vehicle to well-being Join networks of support that focus on personal, relational, and collective well-being Strive for democracy, peace, and respect for diversity
Relational Social cohesion, respect for diversity Democratic participation	Suffering Exclusion and intimidations based on class, age, gender, education, race, and ability Resistance Solidarity and compassion for others who suffer	Suffering Lack of support, competition across social groups, isolation and fragmentation Horizontal violence Resistance Acts of solidarity with other oppressed groups	In-group domination and discrimination Dehumanizing treatment of others in same and different groups Objectification of other Competition for scarce resources	Power equalization in personal, relational, and collective domains Prevent exclusion and promote liberation through education Build trust, connections, and participation in groups
Personal Self-determination and human rights Health Personal growth Meaning and spirituality	Suffering Multiple restrictions in life Self-deprecation, degradation and shame Powerlessness, hopelessness Resistance Strength and resilience	Suffering Loss of life opportunities and lack of control Mental health problems, addictions, internalized oppression Resistance Resilience and solidarity, development of activism	Insufficient material resources and continued exposure to risk Power inequalities Learned helplessness Acting out own oppression on others	Join social action groups that work to enhance personal empowerment and solidarity at the same time Development of assertiveness and positive self and cultural image Sociopolitical development and leadership training

Psychopolitical Well-Being

Just as oppression contains psychological and political dimensions, so do liberation and well-being. The well-being of individuals depends on psychological health as much as on political structures. Political well-being relies on social justice, peace, institutions of human development, and respect for the environment. At the relational level, well-being rests on collaboration and democratic participation, as well as respect

for diversity and social cohesion. Finally, for personal well-being we count on the promotion of health, self-determination, growth, meaning, and spirituality.

The papers in this special issue confirm that psychopolitical well-being comes about through the synergy of values in collective, relational, and personal spheres. Well-being in any one sphere cannot take place in the absence of corresponding satisfaction in the other two. The three constituents of well-being exist in a state of seamlessness and fluidity. Changes in

one domain have a flow-on effect on others. Participatory democracies reinforce social justice through communal mobilization, resulting in better distribution of resources and personal health. In the state of Kerala, India, for instance, a succession of governments committed to participatory democracy stimulated social action that simultaneously increased social cohesion and forced legislators to create land reforms, revise tenancy laws, and provide food supplements for children. Despite having very low economic growth and annual income (US\$370 per capita per year), Kerala boasts health indices comparable to many industrialized countries and much better than the rest of India (Sen, 1999a, 1999b). Witnessing the positive outcomes of their own actions, citizens in Kerala felt empowered to press for more reforms, reinforcing the cycle of praxis (Parayil, 2000).

Indeed, achievements at one level of well-being energize people to pursue the same at other levels. But the reinforcing cycle also works in the opposite direction. Deprivation of rights at the collective level often results in internecine conflict at the relational level, pushing people to lower levels of personal wellness. Violence, isolation, fear, and anxiety often result from this downward spiral. James and her colleagues support this view in their paper dealing with structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal violence (James et al., 2003, this issue). In the same vein cultural deprecation at the collective level results in internalized oppression and partial or complete rejection of one's own reference group (see, e.g., Varas-Díaz & Serrano-García's work, 2003, this issue in Puerto Rico; and Sonn & Fisher's work, 2003, this issue, with colored South Africans). For some groups, then, colonization and oppression undermine, and not necessarily promote solidarity.

Experiences and Consequences of Oppression

Although there is a distinct element of pain, suffering, and indignity, evidence suggests that there is also a strong component of agency in resisting oppression and promoting liberation. The work of Lykes, Hamber, and Terre Blanche (2003, this issue) clearly demonstrates the case. It is obvious from their projects that responses to oppression vary dramatically according to national, regional, cultural, and interpersonal context. Gender differences also account for significant variations in response. Bennett's work in Ontario illustrates the culturally mediated response of Old Order Amish to repressive and regressive policies

(Bennett, 2003, this issue). The self-effacing nature of that culture presented an obstacle to their active opposition to intolerant laws.

Denial of rights, contempt for local culture, feelings of insecurity, and exploitation characterize the collective experience of oppression. These often precede, accompany, or follow economic deprivation, vulnerability to illness, and reduced opportunities in life. As Grant, Finkelstein, and Lyons (2003, this issue) point out in their paper, women suffer more economic disadvantage than men and African American men are more incarcerated than White men. These untoward effects of oppression are countered by social action and sociopolitical education taking place in schools and communities (see Potts, 2003, this issue; and Watts, Williams, & Jager, 2003, this issue).

Absolute poverty is one of the most oppressive forms of living. But even in these circumstances people demonstrate remarkable solidarity and compassion. Narayan and her colleagues documented numerous instances of caring and kindness in research with over 60,000 poor people in 47 countries (Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher, & Koch-Schulte, 2000). Aristide (2000) poignantly describes the case of Haiti, where despite decades of colonization and pillage by consecutive governments poor people continue to struggle for dignity. This is not to romanticize poverty or oppression, for internal conflicts within oppressed communities abound. Exclusion and intimidation based on power differentials of class, race, gender, and ability erode social support within groups in destructive ways.

As noted by Moane (2003, this issue), feelings of inferiority and internalized oppression imbue the personal experience of this negative state. Shame, degradation, and powerlessness come along with addictions and mental health problems. Grant et al. (2003, this issue) note "there is consistent evidence that stress predicts psychological problems over time." True, some go on to become resilient, leaders, and agents of social change, but not without considerable effort to overcome self-doubts and personal adversity (see Watts et al., 2003, this issue). Varas-Díaz and Serrano-García (2003, this issue) point out that "the colonized end up believing they are truly inferior." Grant et al. (2003, this issue), in turn, report that "women have become their own oppressors."

The question of agency versus determinism is very salient in this special issue. We learn from Watts and colleagues some of the paths that lead toward enhanced leadership and agency, while Potts offers educational avenues toward African-centered

empowerment in the United States. Although personal stories of resilience are encouraging, they should not lead us toward a psychologism of person-centered empowerment and heroism.

Sources of Oppression

At the broadest level of analysis colonialism and economic exploitation account for the domination of poor countries. Detailed analyses of globalization show that economic growth and the liberalization of markets benefit only the rich, in the richest of countries. As currently practiced, globalization means the introduction of cheap foreign products by industrialized countries into new markets, the decimation of local competition, the eventual increases in prices for local people, the privatization of public utilities, and the closure of services to comply with demands for structural adjustment by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Kim, Millen, Irwin, & Gersham, 2000; Korten, 1995). Extensive research documents the devastating effects of economic growth without provision for human development and social safety nets (Lustig, 2001; Sen, 1999a, 1999b). The so-called tiger economies in Asia enjoyed a level of momentary prosperity that was all but decimated in the 1997 economic crises (Sen, 1999a). Who suffered the most? Needless to say, the workers who had no social safety nets to protect them.

But economic exploitation in the form of globalization is only one manifestation of international oppression. Other forms include the establishment of dictatorial regimes to satisfy imperial interests of superpowers. The silent and not so silent endorsement of death squads in Latin America by the CIA and its likes produced terror and indignity of calamitous proportions, never quite understood by the U.S. public (cf. Dobbin, 1998). Following the events of September 11, 2001, President Bush naively asked at a press conference: "why don't people like Americans"?

Class and race-based systems of oppression create discrimination, maintain discourses of inferior ability, and refine means of political exclusion. Sexism, racism, ableism, and ageism against the young and the old solidify asymmetric power relations and the status quo. We should be vigilant of adult-centric tendencies—the special issue neglects discrimination against the young and the old.

Societal norms of discrimination are very much felt at the relational plane. Teens of both genders perpetuate stereotypes of "proper" masculinity and fem-

inity. Norms of competition and discourses of homogeneity contribute to the rampant "othering" that currently exists in many parts of the world. When one is the subject of scorn, frustration ensues and learned helplessness quickly settles in. In cases like that, acting out one's oppression on others is not uncommon.

Changes for Liberation

In this special issue, Moane claims that liberation will "ultimately involve transformation of oppressive social structures, which can only occur through collective action." Such collective action, in my view, needs to transcend the concerns of particular groups and must be extended toward other oppressed groups. The fragmentation of suffering colludes with politics of identity to erode solidarity. Collective actions not only need to address the urge to bond with one's reference group but also the imperative to bridge across to other groups (Putnam, 2000). Only then can we expect to overcome the colossal failure of nations and groups to foster relational wellness at global and local levels alike.

Globalization is no longer a remote concept. As Bennett showed, it knocked on the door of an Old Order Amish community to threaten their very way of life. War and poverty are no longer a nightmare experienced only by people in forgotten countries such as Guatemala. Hunger, destruction, and economic exploitation spread with rapid success around the globe now.

Authors in this special issue have eloquently argued for collective action in several domains. I wish to remind us, however, that global poverty remains one of the most devastating forms of suffering and oppression. Sen (1999b) persuasively argued that collective actions must attend to the twin objectives of investment in democracy and in societal structures that promote human development. In the absence of the former the latter cannot prosper. Governments usually cater to economic interests opposed to taxation and social expenditure. Hymns of efficiency and smaller government usually accompany the bogus mantra of economic growth. We must forever ask, however, economic growth for whom?

For the actions in Table I to take effect, we have to maneuver ever carefully the gap between the philosophically desirable and the psychologically feasible. Ideal actions and prescribed states of affairs have to take into account the psychological dynamics that either enable or inhibit participation in local and global

action. The work of Lykes and her colleagues, as well as the efforts by Bennett, illustrate the craft of rapport building, always crucial for collective action (Nelson, Prilleltensky, & McGillivray, 2001).

It is very encouraging to see in this issue attention to sociopolitical development and education, as illustrated in the writings of Potts and Watts and his colleagues. Political literacy is sorely lacking from most societies. In the long term, psychopolitical education may be our best instrument of prevention and promotion. Could we envision schools where engaging lessons on power and politics are taught? Can we go beyond the focus on social and emotional learning to teach children to be actors of social change, to understand politics, to decipher oppressive messages?

CHALLENGES: TOWARD PSYCHOPOLITICAL VALIDITY

The subject of this special issue need not remain the interest of a small group of community psychologists. The emerging challenge for the field is to incorporate our knowledge on oppression and liberation into research and action. To that effect, I suggest a new type of validity. *Psychopolitical validity* refers to the extent to which studies and interventions in the community integrate (a) knowledge with respect to the multidisciplinary and multilevel sources, experiences, and consequences of oppression, and (b) effective strategies for promoting psychological and political liberation in the personal, relational, and collective domains. These concerns are addressed, respectively, by psychopolitical validity I: epistemic, and II: transformative.

Psychopolitical Validity I: Epistemic

Epistemic validity depends on the incorporation of knowledge on oppression into *all* research and action in community psychology. This means accounting for power dynamics operating at psychological and political levels in efforts to understand phenomena of interest. The following questions might guide the pursuit of epistemic psychopolitical validity:

1. Is there an understanding of the impact of global, political, and economic forces on the issue at hand?
2. Is there an understanding of how global, political, economic forces and social norms influence the perceptions and experiences of

individuals and groups affected by the issue at hand?

3. Is there an understanding of how the cognitions, behaviors, experiences, feelings, and perceptions of individuals, groups, and entire communities perpetuate or transform the forces and dynamics affecting the issue at hand?
4. Is there an appreciation of how interactions between political and psychological power at the personal, relational, and collective levels affect the phenomena of interest?

We have seen in this special issue a growing and stimulating understanding of how oppression at macro levels permeates the psychological lived experience of marginalized groups. James and colleagues noted that the effects of structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal violence are magnified when race and poverty are taken into account.

Global and personal dynamics are summarized by Moane in this special issue:

an understanding of oppression involves identifying patterns at the macro level which are related to oppression, and then considering their manifestations in the communities (meso level) and day-to-day settings (micro level) of people's lives. This can then provide the basis for understanding their psychological impact and identifying practices for transformation.

But as Grant and colleagues showed, psychology is far from embracing epistemic psychopolitical validity. Exploring the association between stress and mental health problems in girls, they found that out of over 200 studies reviewed, none “built on feminist theory to examine specific moderators of the relation between sexism based stressors and psychological distress in girls; nor did any examine sexist socialization processes as moderators.”

Although psychology's political illiteracy may not surprise us, the perpetuation of oppressive cultural stereotypes by oppressed people themselves should give us reason to pause. As was the case with youth from Puerto Rico, colored South Africans residing in Australia, and marginalized women in the United States, there are times when research participants declare oppressive views toward their own groups—victims become oppressors. We should then think about adequate interventions to overcome internalized oppression and horizontal violence at the same time.

Psychopolitical Validity II: Transformative

While epistemic validity referred to our understanding of psychopolitical dynamics of oppression, transformative validity demands changes toward liberation at personal, interpersonal, and structural domains. The following questions attend to transformative validity:

1. Do interventions promote psychopolitical literacy?
2. Do interventions educate participants on the timing, components, targets, and dynamics of best strategic actions to overcome oppression?
3. Do interventions empower participants to take action to address political inequities and social injustice within their relationships, settings, communities, states, and at the international level?
4. Do interventions promote solidarity and strategic alliances and coalitions with groups facing similar issues?
5. Do interventions account for the subjectivity and psychological limitations of the agents of change?

Explicit political aims have been often advocated for but infrequently acted upon in community psychology. Transformative validity may serve to remind us that political literacy and social change have to be part of *all* our interventions. We seek not only to ameliorate social conditions but also to alter the configurations of power that deprive citizens of their rights (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). Bennett enacted transformative validity on behalf of the Old Order Amish community of Ontario. His efforts involved “collaborative work with other citizens, from a different culture, on local distributive justice concerns from the basis of a structural analysis and with social transformation and sustainable development in mind” (this issue). There are other exemplars of transformative work. We just need to bring them from the periphery to the center of community psychology.

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