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# Critical Psychology and Career Development: Unpacking the Adjust–Challenge Dilemma

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## Abstract

Adjusting to the world of work or challenging it is a dilemma that career counselors and helpers encounter daily. Counselors and clients may opt for one of the following choices: (a) adjust to, and challenge the system, at the same time, (b) adjust to the system but do not challenge it, (c) challenge the system but do not adjust to it, and (d) neither adjust to the system nor challenge it. These four scenarios are analyzed from the perspective of critical psychology and psychopolitical validity. A model depicting the various consequences of each choice for power relations, social justice, and the well-being of people, organizations, communities, and the environment is introduced. The model can guide practitioners in discerning the consequences of their actions and those of their clients.

## Keywords

critical psychology, psychopolitical validity, adjustment, well-being, career

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## Introduction

The *adjust–challenge* dilemma refers to the struggle to adjust to the world of work while challenging it at the same time. Four configurations of these two positions are possible: (a) adjust to, and challenge the system, at the same time, (b) adjust but do not challenge, (c) challenge but do not adjust, and (d) neither adjust to the system nor challenge it. These four scenarios can and probably should cause consternation among career professionals helping diverse populations (Amundson, Harris-Bowlsbey, & Niles, 2008; Figler & Bolles, 2007; Flores, 2008). In this article, we will explore these four scenarios from a critical psychology perspective.

The adjust–challenge predicament may be viewed from multiple angles: from the perspective of the actual or potential employee or client, from the perspective of the counselor advising clients, and more broadly from the perspective of the counseling profession (Grier-Reed, Skaar, & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Weer, Greenhaus, & Linnehan, 2010). Depending on the vantage point, the dilemma is experienced differently (Flores, 2008).

The adjust–challenge predicament is implicitly present in career theories and literature. Some career theorists have focused more on career adjustment (e.g., Dawis, 2005; Holland, 1997), career adaptability (e.g., Savickas, 2002), compromise (e.g., Gottfredson, 2002), and how to negotiate career barriers through self-management or social supports (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002) but less on why and how clients and workers might challenge the system. These theorists emphasize self-development, self-improvement, self-efficacy, self-creation, and self-regulation, all hallmarks of societies valuing individualism, as ways to make optimal career choices. While they acknowledge the environment as facilitating or obstructing these endeavors, they seldom consider how the working world may be restructured from ethical and social justice perspectives to the benefit of workers. Sociological career theorists, such as Johnson and Mortimer (2002), closely examine how work structures shape individuals' career development. The salient perspective in career theories remains the notion that people have a variety of career choices that can best be realized through understanding their personalities, interests, values, and self-concepts, notwithstanding some environmental and cultural barriers (Blustein, 2006). The assumption underlying all career theories is that at least some career choice is present, if only individuals knew how to properly utilize their inherent characteristics and relational and contextual resources to successfully navigate the world of work. Career psychology has placed little emphasis on oppression, how this maintains the status quo and marginalizes people and the extent to which this may severely limit or remove individuals' career choice options. Warnath (1975) voiced this concern almost four decades ago, adding that career theories were relevant to a decreasing number of workers in the United States.

While career development researchers have reflected on forms of oppression, such as sexual harassment, discrimination, and social class, they have seldom drawn explicitly on the critical psychology literature to underpin their views. There have

been some notable exceptions (e.g., Ali, Liu, Mahmood, & Arguello, 2008; Blustein, 2006; Blustein, Kenna, Gill, & DeVoy, 2008; Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005). To help us understand the two sides of the tension—adjust and/or challenge—we will use a critical psychology framework to work and well-being. Furthermore, we will introduce psychopolitical validity as a tool in helping clients and professionals cope with the adjust–challenge quandary.

## Critical Psychology and Well-Being

Critical psychology is an intellectual and applied movement derived principally from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. In line with that legacy, it seeks to critique the role of the social sciences in general, and psychology in particular, in upholding the societal status quo (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009). When the status quo perpetuates oppression and injustice, critical psychologists claim, the role of psychology is to critique the system and demand transformation, not to provide intellectual apologies for it (Parker, 2007). And yet, despite evidence that social structures in most capitalist societies discriminate and oppress vast sectors of society (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), the voice of psychology and career psychology has been used mostly to justify the system and not to challenge it. Self-regulation in keeping with societal norms is expected and self-blame, rather than societal blame, is the consequence. Scholars have documented extensively the use of intrapsychic and intrapersonal factors by psychologists to explain social malaise. Thus, human suffering generated by structures of exclusion and oppression is redefined as personal problems deriving from inadequate coping mechanisms, unresolved childhood conflicts, gender deficiencies, and the like (Parker, 1999). Feminist psychologists as well as psychologists specializing in class, disability, and race issues have decried the complicity of psychology in reconstituting social oppression into psychological deficiencies (Prilleltensky, 1994).

Most psychosocial problems derive from an interaction among psychological, family, community, economic, political, and sociological problems. There is extensive evidence that childhood poverty affects psychosocial development, that racial discrimination generates mistrust and hostility, that male dominated societies oppress women, and that economic and political power have lasting psychological repercussions for those with and without it (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

Against this background of professional complicity, critical psychologists express condemnation of an unwitting support for a system that excludes and marginalizes women, the poor, the disabled, and the colored citizen (Levy & Sidel, 2006). But the work of critical psychologists does not end in critique. Many critical psychologists offer alternatives to both society and psychology (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). To appreciate the alternatives, we need to define some foundational concepts: oppression, liberation, and well-being.

## *Oppression, Liberation, and Well-Being*

Oppression is both a state and a process. As a state, it represents an undesirable situation whereby individuals or groups with economic, social, cultural, psychological, political, or military power dominate others and limit their options. This state of domination is never absolute but can severely curtail the freedom and well-being of individuals or groups. Oppression can be exerted by single people, groups, or entire nations. As a process, oppression entails the act of suppressing the freedoms of other people, groups, or nations (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996).

Liberation, in contrast, is the act and the process of overcoming oppression. Individuals may liberate themselves from abusive relationships, abusive bosses, and abusive families. And whereas some people are fortunate to experience well-being without ever having experienced oppression, a great deal of people cannot experience well-being without going through a process of liberation (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). While the career development literature has focused on well-being (e.g., see Special Issue on Well-being, Walsh, 2008), the primary focus has been on the individual at work, with little said about the implications of well-being in relation to oppression and social justice, and how marginalized people may obtain increased access to work.

This discussion begs the question what well-being is all about. While definitions abound, in our view, well-being is a positive state of affairs in individuals, relationships, schools, organizations, communities, and the environment, brought about by the complementary satisfaction of objective and subjective needs (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). Objective needs refer to material requisites such as shelter, clothing, and economic resources, while subjective needs refer to psychological requisites for wellness such as self-determination, sense of control, emotional support, and dignity. As we will argue below, the satisfaction of objective and subjective needs is highly dependent on equity and justice. This means that the fulfillment of needs must be accompanied by policies and practices that foster equity and the fair allocation of resources and obligations. Research on the social determinants of well-being demonstrates that societies with more equal distribution of resources experience less health and psychosocial problems than those with less egalitarian policies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Moreover, studies show that within societies, those with more economic and social resources live longer and are healthier than those with fewer resources (Marmot, 2004). Comparisons within and across societies demonstrate that inequality is bad for your health, and it is especially bad for those with fewer resources (Blustein, 2008; Levy & Sidel, 2006).

Going deeper into the definition of well-being, it behooves us to clarify the type of objective and subjective needs of individuals, relationships, organizations, communities, and the environment; and the relationship among these five domains. Furthermore, we need to discern how to fulfill these needs with certain values, and how these values are, themselves, given to just or unjust distribution. Table 1 offers an overview of the five sites of well-being, as well as examples of signs and values.

**Table 1.** An Ecological Approach to Well-Being: Examples of Signs and Values

	Sites of Well-Being				
	Individual	Relational	Organizational	Communal	Environmental
Objective signs	+Health +Money -Illness -Poverty +Efficacy +Control	+Networks +Instrumental support -Isolation -Violence +Voice +Choice	+Resources +Effective structures -Lack of resources -Chaos +Support +Affirmation	+Social capital +Low crime rate -Lack of trust -High crime +Belonging +Reciprocity -Rejection	+Clean air +Green spaces -Pollution -Urban decay +Safety +Respect for nature -Fear
Subjective signs	-Lack of competence -Lack of control +Autonomy +Freedom	-Repression -Constrained +Caring +Compassion	-Isolation -Condemnation +Participation +Collaboration	-Greed +Diversity +Inclusion -Discrimination -Exclusion	-Environmental neglect +Protection of resources +Sustainability -Depletion of resources -Consumerism
Values	-Lack of power -Subjugation +My due/Our due	-Neglect -Dismissal +Your due/Our due	-Marginality -Dictatorial +Its due/Our due	-Discrimination -Exclusion +Their due/Our due	-Depletion of resources -Consumerism +Nature's due/Our due

Note: Table adapted with permission from the publisher from Prilleltensky (2008).

As may be seen, we conceptualize well-being in ecological terms. That is, as a favorable state that does not reside just within individuals but also within relationships, organizations, and higher ecological levels. All levels are interconnected. Studies demonstrate the tight connection among environmental, communal, workplace, interpersonal, and personal wellness (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). In favorable conditions of safety and cognitive stimulation, kids learn better and feel better. Under stressful working conditions, employees develop psychological and physical symptoms. In abusive relationships individuals suffer. Well-being cannot be restricted to the level of the private citizen.

While the various sites of well-being have intrinsic wellness, they also have instrumental value in the wellness of other sites. Thus, the natural environment deserves to be preserved for its own sake but also for the sake of the community and its inhabitants. They all operate synergistically (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006).

Looking at individual well-being, Table 1 offers positive objective signs such as physical health and negative signs such as illness. Across the table, we see instances of positive or negative objective and subjective signs for the various sites of well-being. Objective signs refer to measurable and material conditions, whereas subjective signs pertain to psychological and perceptual phenomena, such as sense of control, belonging, and safety. Both types of signs, objective and subjective, are related but sufficiently distinct to merit their own categorization. A person may be well physically but not well psychologically. Similarly, an organization may enjoy ample resources and profits, but people in it might feel isolated and unappreciated (Kidd, 2008). This is why it is important to pay attention to both material and perceptual measures of well-being.

### *Values and Justice*

To obtain maximal well-being, expressed in positive objective and subjective signs, we, as a society, need to embrace certain values and practices that support well-being. Values such as participation, inclusion, and autonomy, are crucial and culturally driven (Brown, 2002), but they are not self-standing. They depend heavily on the dominant conception of justice in the culture. Justice, which has been traditionally defined as the fair and equitable allocation of benefits and burdens in society, is subject to various interpretations. "*To each his or her due*," that is the defining characteristic of justice (Miller, 1978, 1999). In Table 1, the bottom row reminds us that justice is a balancing act between what different constituents are due. If we follow this definition, we need to decide how to give each person his or her due. What are the right criteria according to which I can confidently say you deserve this and not that piece of the pie? Traditionally, moral and political philosophers distinguish among merit and need (Miller, 1999). Merit, in turn, can be subdivided into effort or ability. A person may deserve a reward, such as a scholarship, due to her talent or hard work. A second person, however, may deserve a resource due to need. Need and merit are two different paragons of justice, and political philosophers have been

arguing both sides of the debate for many years. Some philosophers advocate a contextual approach whereby the social conditions help us to determine which criterion we should use: need or merit (Facione, Scherer, & Attig, 1978; Miller, 1999).

Let us take caring for example. Many people endorse this value and proclaim to care for the disadvantaged. If you espouse an ideology of justice based strictly on merit, you will advance a notion of caring and compassion that means to put individual band aids on societal cancers. You will try to participate in efforts to mentor kids from poor communities, you will participate in food drives, and you will donate to homeless shelters. You might have sincere compassion for the unemployed. But in the end, you have to ask yourself if all this compassion challenges the status quo or perpetuates it (Parker, 2007).

Caring based on a contextually sensitive notion of justice would lead to different outcomes. The belief that inequality is a structural challenge to well-being at work and that we should take care of needs before we grant differential advantages based on merit is a different proposition. This stance would have us creating conditions of equality. After we achieve more or less conditions of equality, it would be fine to award greater rewards to those who work harder and have more talent, because all had a similar starting point. However, ignoring the starting point in the race of life is the equivalent of moral cheating (Miller, 1999). We would not dream of allowing some athletes in the Olympics to start their race closer to the finish line. In the race of life, many people start closer to the finish line; start with better equipment, and after much more training than others. The basic assumptions we hold about justice affect the type of caring we espouse and how much autonomy and inclusion we foster. Justice based on merit alone would have us concentrate on the qualities of the individual qua individual. Justice based on need would have us concentrate on the contexts that shape outcomes. Following the former would lead to enhanced autonomy based on personal improvement. Following the latter would lead to autonomy based on improved conditions of life. To the extent that career psychology obscures the importance of environmental conditions it serves to prolong conceptions of justice that favor merit, which, in our mind, is questionable justice (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2009).

## **Critical Psychology and Work**

Workplaces can be sources of great satisfaction and great stress (Boyd, Lewin, & Sager, 2009). Fortunate people work in supportive, stimulating, and rewarding environments. Millions, however, work under conditions of pressure or outright exploitation (Blustein, 2006; Bond, 2007; Kidd, 2008). Under the guise of promoting worker well-being, psychologists in the past have colluded with the captains of industry in turning attention away from fundamental injustices and toward issues of personal attitude and adjustment. It is for that reason that many unions reject professional counseling and efforts to include psychologists in appeasing discontent (Baritz, 1974; Islam & Zyphur, 2009).



Psychologists and career counselors, who are not immune to the prevailing ideology of personal success and failure, are often unwitting accomplices in the perpetuation of this grand narrative. Entire industries in the form of think tanks, magazines, pundits, entertainment, and education are dedicated to disseminate an ideology of individualism. You are in charge of your destiny, your life is in your hands, if other people can do it, so can you, and on and on (Schwalbe, 2007). Seemingly empowering messages of hope turn out to be messages of acquiescence. Your success is your own doing, and your failure is yours alone. Relational perspectives to career choice and development (e.g., Schultheiss, 2003) acknowledge that these are incomplete accounts of achievement and underachievement; for the successful person almost always has somebody and something to thank, and the less successful has multiple reasons that conspire to undermine her efforts. We all want to believe that our successes are attributable to our own hard work, making privilege invisible. But privilege does exist and does make a difference (Goodman, 2001).

Critical psychologists contend that we are insufficiently aware of how we collude with the societal status quo. Whereas we critique the system for inequities, our practice sustains the ideology that marginalizes many of our clients in the first place. Through career testing, placements, personality assessment, and person-centered coping solutions, attention is focused on personal reasons, personal problems, and personal solutions (Prilleltensky, 1994). McIlveen and Patton (2006) showed that using such psychological tools, career researchers and practitioners are complicit in the general political and economic discourse; one that normalizes and favors corporate success over worker well-being. We take it for granted that there is injustice in the world, that workplaces can be cruel, and that our job is just to coach people how to survive. This stance poses benefits and disadvantages that we will explore later when we return to the “adjust–challenge” dilemma. Suffice to say that many professional counselors likely entertain an internal dialogue that goes more or less like this: “I know the system is unjust, but what can I do? I’m only one person. Besides, I studied how to help individuals, not how to change systems of injustice. For that, there are social movements and political parties. I really wish I could help eliminate discrimination and classism but I need to be realistic. What I can do is to help the individual client who works with me.” This is a very reasonable stance on one hand but very problematic on the other (Aldarondo, 2007). It seems reasonable because it seems pragmatic, but it is problematic because it fails to challenge, in any meaningful way, a system rigged against those without cultural, economic, or gender power (Schwalbe, 2007).

## **Psychopolitical Validity and Career Development**

If you ever entertained a dialogue similar to the one above, you might have felt some cognitive dissonance. Confronted with that dissonance, people can do one of two things: escape it or struggle with it. We choose to struggle with it, and we invite you to do the same. Faced with conflict and with the certainty that we, as psychologists,

are influenced by cultural forces that aim to sustain a system we disapprove of, we suggest we think of alternative practices. Far from suggesting that there are psychologists oblivious to injustice, we are suggesting that many are very aware of it but limited in their practice by the mores of professional training (Aldarondo, 2007). To help rattle the cage of professional rigidity, we suggest we explore psychopolitical validity.

The construct of psychopolitical validity aims to bring attention to the role of power in psychological and social well-being and to the reciprocal determinism of political and psychological forces in fostering wellness. More specifically, psychopolitical validity is a criterion we use to evaluate theory and practice in the helping professions (Prilleltensky, 2008). This criterion consists of how much attention we pay to the role of power in relation to work in explaining political and psychological factors associated with oppression, liberation, and well-being in individuals, groups, and communities. Inherent in this criterion is the understanding that power can be subjective and objective and that both are important. The sharper our analysis of psychological and political power, the better our professional practice will be (Speer, Newbrough, & Lorion, 2008). But our concern is not only with understanding, it is also with action. Consequently, we offer two kinds of psychopolitical validity: epistemic and transformational.

### *Epistemic Psychopolitical Validity*

We achieve this type of validity when we methodically account for the role of power in political and psychological dynamics affecting wellness, oppression, and liberation at the personal, interpersonal, organizational, and social levels. If we define political power as consisting of decision-making authority based on access to money, media, culture, resources, connections, and position; and if we define psychological power as consisting of influence based on subjective dynamics such as fear and internalized oppression, we can easily see how political and psychological power interact. The fear of being fired leads to acquiescence. Access to money and media influence how people think of themselves and others. Many schools and businesses are dedicated to creating images of success and, by corollary, failure. Hopelessness, helplessness, and self-deprecation are tied to these images. By the same token, resilience and solidarity are connected to political power. It is very difficult for a community or a union to feel strong without political organization and advocacy. Activism and leadership generate both political and psychological power.

In addition, power can be conceptualized as working through discourse (Foucault, 1980). In this view, power is present in almost all discourses. Through discourses, people and organizations are constituted through the effects of power. For example, the discourse of career counseling carries the power to treat people as receivers of ideas or objects of information rather than co-constructing subjects. Furthermore, this discourse carries labels, diagnoses, and categories. Career discourse includes the perception of individuals as having a core self that can be

understood and assisted to make “useful” career decisions. This modern practice of power may limit one’s feelings of self-worth and increase self-blame, thus providing an appreciation of the destructive effects on people that work discourses can produce. Discourses are not merely harmless words; they do things and have a profound effect on how people perceive, react, and act (Stead & Bakker, 2010).

Wellness at the organizational level, for example, may be explained by the political power of workers to organize and by their psychological power to have a voice and express their feelings (Kidd, 2008). Oppression at the personal level, in turn, is a function of psychological powerlessness and inability to access valued political resources such as money or benefits. The more we explore the connections among psychological and political dynamics of power, the more we see how closely intertwined they are, regardless of whether they are hierarchically driven or channeled through worker discourse. Just as it would be a mistake to narrow the human experience to the presence or absence of material resources, so it would be to circumscribe it to the presence of pleasant feelings. Subjective and objective phenomena are equally important in accounting for wellness, oppression, and liberation (Christens & Perkins, 2008).

### *Transformational Psychopolitical Validity*

Whereas epistemic psychopolitical validity concerned itself with explaining phenomena in ways that took into account power, transformational validity derives from the potential of our actions to make lasting positive changes for people and societies (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Once we achieve a thorough understanding of the role of power on well-being, we can launch more effective interventions. At the collective level, a focus on liberation would help us work on movements of resistance and efforts to depower privileged groups who take advantage of their position. The most recent economic collapse is a perfect example of how few people and corporations with enormous economic power (too big to fail) used their power to generate private gains at the expense of millions of people who put their “blind” faith in the system.

At the school, workplace, or organizational level, valid transformative interventions would enrich awareness of in-group and out-group dynamics. Furthermore, they would challenge abuses of power and organize workers to resist exploitive working conditions. Psychopolitically valid interventions lead to sociopolitical development and awareness of subjective forces preventing commitment to justice. They also contribute to human development, peace, and the protection of the environment. They help resist complacency and collusion with exploitive systems and build awareness of our own prejudice.

Against this general background, it is important to apply psychopolitical validity to career development. To do so, we return to our original “adjust–challenge” dilemma.

## *Psychopolitical Validity and the Adjust–Challenge Dilemma*

One way to explore psychopolitical validity in career development and the world of work is through the “adjust–challenge dilemma.” As noted earlier, this dilemma refers to the struggle to adjust to the world of work, with all its imperfections, and/or to challenge it; and if to challenge it, whether to do it from the inside or the outside. To refresh our memory, there are four possible scenarios in which the “adjust” and “challenge” options interact: (a) adjust but do not challenge; (b) challenge but do not adjust; (c) neither adjust to the system nor challenge it; and (d) adjust and challenge. We will analyze these four scenarios from the relative perspective of the counselor and the client.

*The counselor’s dilemma.* If you are a career counselor, which of the four options reflects best your attitude to the world of work? If you are a psychologist, or a helper of any kind, which one represents what you do best? As psychologists who worked in therapy, consulted with schools, communities, and organizations, and for two decades have been involved in higher education, we want to say that we choose “d.” A good measure of social desirability goes into our answer. We want to believe that we adjust to the system but that we challenge it at the same time. We are certain this is the answer that makes each of us look the best. We want to come across as well adjusted but critical of the system at the same time. Tough questions, however, have to be answered for us to fully justify this position.

Using psychopolitical validity as a guide, we can probe deeper into our answer. For example, to what extent can we practice in psychopolitically valid ways within systems that are unjust and sometimes even oppressive? Adjusting is easy; challenging the system is complicated. The rewards structure tempts us to comply with corporate mentality (Blustein, 2006; McIlveen & Patton, 2006). There are soft and hard consequences for speaking up; all the way from a mild reprimand to being demoted or fired (Bond, 2007).

Seeking epistemic psychopolitical validity to the experience of being a worker, we need to answer the following questions:

1. Do we understand how political power and psychological power in counseling, schools, and organizations operate to silence discontent in subtle and blatant ways?
2. Can we recognize cultural norms and implicit prescriptions and proscriptions in schools and organizations about what is safe to talk about and what is not?
3. Are there ways in which I, as a counselor or as a worker in an organization, wittingly or unwittingly reinforce unjust or uncaring policies and practices?
4. Am I aware of how my privilege as a counselor within an organization or school serves to mollify my perceptions of injustice within it?

The above questions can also translate into research questions. For example, in their organization, to what extent do workers perceive barriers in communicating their

concern about unjust policies or how might they inadvertently reinforce such policies? How is power used by management and workers to silence others and for what purposes?

These are difficult questions to answer in the affirmative. From the point of view of psychologists who worked in a variety of academic and nonacademic settings, and who held various levels of power within these settings, we can attest that it is very difficult to be part of a system and genuinely challenge it at the same time. We are sure there are others who are more astute than us in forcing systems to change, but we do not think it is just our personal problems. We all have war stories of battling tradition and injustice and achieving only moderate levels of success within our clinics, schools, universities, corporations, and community organizations.

If we want to push ourselves further than epistemic validity, we can ask ourselves how well we do with questions of transformational psychopolitical validity:

1. Do I foster among my colleagues an appreciation of how power differentials affect the well-being of our employees and our clients?
2. Have I tried to change how I use my power and authority in ways that promote interpersonal and social well-being?
3. To what extent do I use power to advance a more fair and equitable allocation of resources, burden, and obligations within my organization?
4. Can I organize my professional association to challenge societal injustices such as the lack of universal health care or the appalling low funding of public schools?

These are all questions that would push us to higher levels of psychopolitically validity in our work and to more effective ways of challenging the system. These may also translate into possible research questions.

There is no question that many people think they are changing society, when in fact they are tinkering at the margins (Quiñones Rosado, 2007; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). From a psychopolitical point of view, we would ask if the change is oriented toward challenging structures of oppression and fostering liberation at, minimally, one of following levels: personal, interpersonal, organizational, or social. If it does not, it may be a useful change but not a transformational one. The more multilevel the change is the more sustainable and effective it will be.

Options “b” (challenge but do not adjust) and “c” (neither adjust nor challenge) have merit. We submit that there is social benefit in having people who, on their own volition, do not want to adjust to a rigid system of work. We also think that it is salutary to have people who opt out of the system; they push all of us to consider alternatives. The fact that most of us adjust to the system does not make it right. Accounts of corrupted and inflexible systems that rob people of their creativity abound. If given a choice, many people would quit their jobs and invent more humane organizations. Stress in organizations ranges from the comic to the tragic, so before we judge those who choose “b” or “c” as maladjusted we would pause and consider

their point of view (Blustein, 2006). People who opt out remind us that there are other ways of living.

Of course, there are people who are not part of the system but want to be in it. Let us address that as part of the client's dilemma.

*The client's dilemma.* Giving primacy to the values of autonomy and self-determination, we submit that career counselors would want to help clients achieve their goals; which might entail any of the four choices of the dilemma. Let us explore the most difficult one first: (c) neither adjust to the system nor challenge it. *Prima facie*, we might react negatively to people wanting to be outside the system. We understand; we have been conditioned by many years of socialization to believe that there is one way to achieve fulfillment and that it is within the system. From our parents to our teachers to our preachers, we have been told to adjust to the system, to go to a good college, to get a good job, to make a lot of money, and not to make too many waves. Others, in turn, may have been conditioned to get a job right out of high school. Either way, it is hard to imagine that families and schools would socialize kids to be outside the system. It is difficult to know whether we, as human beings, would choose to be outside the world of work if we were not conditioned to be in it.

Nevertheless, assuming that self-determining individuals choose to live at the margin of society, make minimal money on part-time jobs, live frugally, and never be part of a structured system, counselors would want to help them achieve that goal. In actual fact, there may be very few clients who come to counselors with such ambitions, but the reason we push this point is to force us to consider alternative ways of living that do not conform to the societal status quo.

Critical psychology aims to challenge taken-for-granted notions of life satisfaction, especially when personal fulfillment entails participation in systems of injustice. Yet, while critical psychologists would want to explore ways of living without buying into systems of exploitation, they might object to people sitting on the sidelines. Neutrality, after all, supports the existing structures of oppression (Prilleltensky, 1994).

Once again, this discussion assumes that clients come to us as fully self-determining individuals. That is, they alone decided to seek help in living outside the system. This theoretical position might be hard to accept by some counselors because they would question whether the client "really" wants to pursue life outside the system or whether there is some kind of defense mechanism at play. Perhaps, the client is afraid of failure and is inventing ideological rationalizations. It is indeed possible that people might be afraid of failure and would come up with excuses for not wanting to join the "rat race." By the same token, it is possible that some of them would truly and genuinely, without undue pressure or psychological infirmities, want to be outside the system. From a critical psychology point of view, we would want to be completely open-minded about what clients bring to the table and withhold judgment about their inability to adjust.

Our imaginary client might challenge some of our basic assumptions about ourselves. What does it mean if we are, and want to be, part of a system that reproduces inequality? Most of us quiet our conscience with internal dialogues that tell us that “it is better to fight within the system,” “I’m only one person against the system, what can I do?,” and “I can’t risk my livelihood and become an unemployed protester.” We, for one, have had such thoughts.

This leads us to ponder option (b): challenge but do not adjust. What if our client wants to become an unemployed protester? How are we to react to a self-determining individual, who, free of psychological conflicts, proclaims that corporations and most organizations stifle creativity, induce stress, and engage in inhumane practices? Furthermore, she tells us that she believes in nonviolent social movements and that she will do whatever she can to challenge systems of oppression. Having determined that this individual does not have any psychological problems, the counselor ought to assist her in pursuing her convictions.

Option (a) “adjust but not challenge” is a position many assume. In fact, it might very well be the default stance. What are we to say to a client who wishes to have a quiet life, unperturbed by the complications of politics? After all, she has seen what politics can do to people in her office or shop floor. “Politics is nasty and gets the worst out of people,” she says. She would rather stay out of trouble.

On one hand, we must respect our client’s wishes; we are bound to respect their views and refrain from making them into troublemakers. On the other hand, is there not room to consider what the system might be doing to people like her and her colleagues? This is a delicate situation that requires a balance between introducing ideas that cause unsolicited consternation and respecting her wish to stay out of social problems. As helping professionals, we may feel more comfortable with a client who assumes the “adjust and challenge” posture (option d). That might be more in line with our own ideological stance. This is the best of both worlds: adjust but challenge at the same time. The only glitch we see in this otherwise socially desirable stance is that many of us think that we are challenging the system when in fact we are not.

This, of course, begs the question, again, what constitutes “system transformation.” A well-respected scholarly tradition claims that first-order change is only ameliorative, whereas second-order change is transformative. First-order changes deal with modifications within the fundamental structures of the system, whereas second-order changes deal with the very fundamentals of the system. Thus, for example, improving communications within a workplace may be a first-order change, whereas the creation of a less hierarchical structure that gives voice to all concerned is a second-order change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). We would submit that a real challenge to the system is one that (a) alters power relations in line with psychopolitical transformational validity and (b) promotes social justice by distributing resources and obligations within the system in fair and equitable ways. With respect to the former criterion, we believe that challenging abuses of power and sharing power more equitably among members of an organization or community is a



transformational change. The more power people experience, the more they use their voice, the more they challenge convention, and the more they participate in the world around them. With respect to the second criterion, many consequential outcomes flow from dominant conceptions of justice. Rewarding the privileged class and withholding opportunities to the poor, simply because the former grew up in the “right part of town” and the latter did not, is hardly defensible.

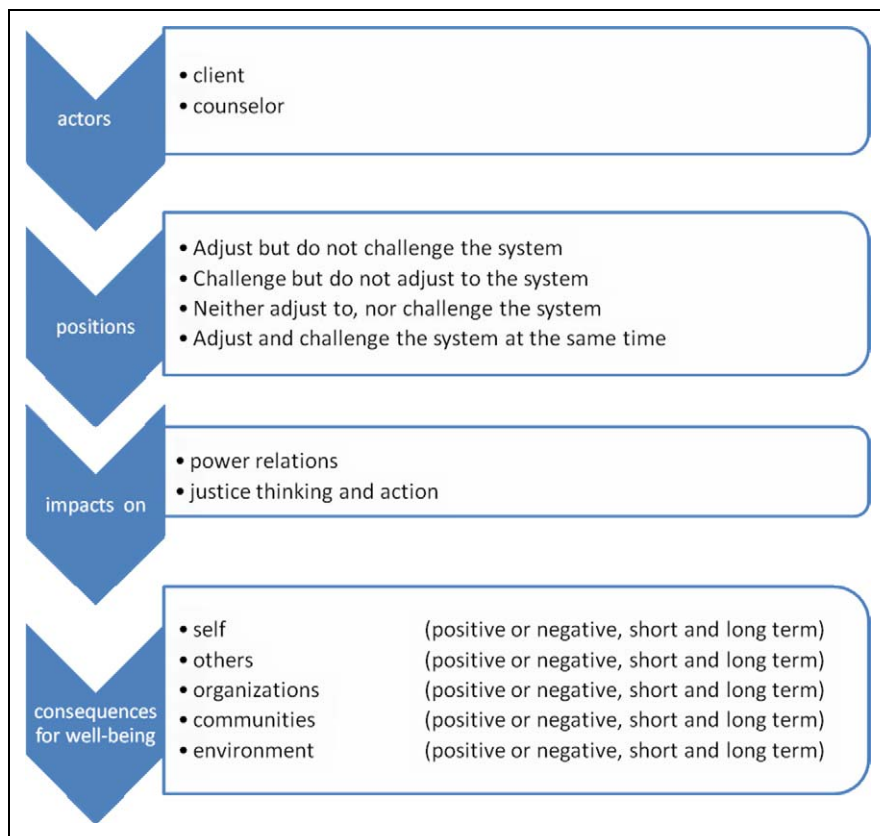
Needless to say, diverse arguments as to what constitutes system transformation may be proposed and refuted. But the fact remains that many people are satisfied with minimalist conceptions of change and social transformation. For us, redistributing power and resources in line with values of autonomy, caring, compassion, inclusion, collaboration, and especially social justice, is a change that can lead to transformative change.

*Modeling the impact of the various positions vis-à-vis the system.* As the foregoing discussion shows, each position vis-à-vis the system can have diverse consequences. Figure 1 is a model of the impact that various positions can have on power relations; conceptions and applications of justice; and well-being of people, organizations, communities, and the environment. The model shows two principal actors: the client and the counselor. They can act independently of each other but they can also influence each other (Vilhjalmsdottir & Tulinius, 2009). These actors assume any one of the positions vis-à-vis the system of work that we have been discussing. Each position will have differential impacts on power relations and on the thinking and practice of justice in organizations, communities, cultures, and societies. These impacts, in turn, will have consequences for the short- and long-term well-being of individuals, other people, organizations, communities, and the environment. These consequences may be positive or negative in either the short or long term. Furthermore, they may be beneficial for an individual but untoward for communities.

By way of illustration, a client who assumes the “adjust but do not challenge” stance may contribute to the perpetuation of unequal power relations. By not challenging systems of injustice, he may be promoting negative long-term consequences for the community but positive short-term consequences for himself. If this person benefits from privilege and the status quo, we can reasonably expect him to conform to the status quo. Such conformity will benefit him but not others.

Consider another example. Linda chooses to do her best to adjust but to challenge the system at the same time. She might question policies and practices that discriminate against women in her organization. This may have a positive long-term consequence on the organization and eventually on society as a whole, but in the short term, she is viewed as a troublemaker and suffers the consequences of marginalization within her workplace. Multiple configurations vis-à-vis the system can take place. Our job is to be as methodical as we can in trying to anticipate outcomes and elucidate them for ourselves, our colleagues, and our clients. What might be in the best short-term interest of our own clients may have deleterious consequences for society later on. If we care only about the well-being of the person in front of us,





**Figure 1.** Modeling the impact of various positions vis-à-vis the system and the world of work.

we need not concern ourselves with the ecological consequences of her behavior, but if we do care about the environment, the culture, and marginalized groups, we must worry about the impact of her actions.

## Conclusion

The article started with confident postulates about the ingredients of well-being and psychopolitical validity but it ended with more questions than answers. How do we bridge the certainty of theoretical frameworks and ethical imperatives with the uncertainty of bothersome questions like the ones we posed above? The frustrating reality is that the “adjust–challenge” dilemma defies simple answers. We would submit that bridging between philosophy and action requires reflective practice. That is, the creation of a safe space where colleagues can share dilemmas and push

each other gently to question basic assumptions, such as what is wrong with being outside the system and what is good about being within it. The adjust–challenge scenarios force us to consider why we want to help people and to what extent we are functioning as agents of control or agents of change.

Questioning our fundamental values, assumptions, and practices is not something we do readily. Confronting our unwitting complicity in systems of oppression is painful. And even after we muster the courage to do so, we are limited by our own biases. This is why we need to create dialogical spaces where our friends can support us and challenge us at the same time. The creation of such spaces requires community building and critical reflective practice. This is a laborious process that can get contaminated by power differentials within the group and the organization, but the alternative is none too appealing. Silence in the face of injustice is hardly defensible. Counselors are trained in the art of talking, listening, and creating safe spaces. We are merely suggesting that we apply that skill not just to our clients but also to ourselves, as we figure out how cultural norms of individualism seep into our practice. Thinking about well-being in ecological terms, considering the role of power in it, and promoting psychopolitical validity, may help us develop a compass. What is more, they can help us align our values with our practice.

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