**The Road to Mattering: Challenging the Status Quo, Promoting Wellness and Fairness**

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No Ph.D. student had ever written a theoretical or philosophical dissertation in the Department of Psychology at the University of Manitoba until 1989. Empirical studies were the norm. A combination of chutzpah, innocence, courage, and a mild degree of stupidity propelled me to challenge convention in the very traditional department. Supported by my Ph.D. advisor, Freddy Marcuse, I proposed to write a theoretical and philosophical critique of the conservative ideology of mainstream psychology. The dissertation would be called *Psychology and the Status Quo*. My main argument was that psychological theories and practices tended to redefine social problems into intrapsychic maladies. As a result, instead of focusing on social injustice, psychology helped society to focus on personal inadequacies.

Growing up in Argentina during a dictatorship, I developed a precocious distrust of authorities, including the authority of scientific discourse. I had witnessed how the press and social science were used to suppress dissent. As a member of a youth movement opposing the military dictatorship I was exposed to social critique early in life. From the age of about twelve to sixteen I attended regular discussions of social issues such as injustice, oppression, and dictatorships. They took place in a Zionist youth movement that aimed to promote peace and collectivist ideas in Israel and around the world. The movement was called Amos, after the prophet.

In the early and mid-seventies, many Jewish kids like me joined social movements in Argentina to fight fascism. In 1976 the situation was so dangerous that a group of us decided to leave the country and make Aliyah, which means to ascend, or migrate, to Israel. Friends and family members opposing the regime would disappear or be killed in broad daylight in Argentina. My sister was a political prisoner there and was subsequently sent to exile to Paraguay, a cooperating regime. It took us seven years to reconnect with her.

The youth movement placed a lot of emphasis on what we might call today critical thinking. We critiqued articles, books, and political propaganda. We dissected popular culture and its ideology. This was a form of discourse analysis aimed at understanding how culture and politics reproduce the societal status quo. A famous book we read at the time was *Para leer al Pato Donald* (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1971), which was later translated into English as *How to Read Donald Duck* (1975). The subtitle of the book was *Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic.*

The involvement of the CIA in toppling the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile in the early seventies hit close to home (Dinges, 2004). Ariel Dorfman, the author of our guide to imperialism, was born in Buenos Aires, to Jewish parents from Odessa and Kishinev, the same part of the world where my ancestors came from. Dorfman lived in Argentina, Chile and the United States. His counter-culture *How to Read Donald Duck* resonated very much with all of us who were struggling against fascism.

In Israel I finished high school and my first two degrees. I lost my parents in a car accident when I was eight years old; an experience that led me to psychology. I thought I could use my life experience to help others. During my master’s in the Clinical Child Psychology program at Tel Aviv University I was exposed mostly to psychoanalytic approaches. I read, on my own, the works of Erich Fromm, who was the most socially-minded psychoanalyst I knew at the time. I loved his work. I devoured all his books. There was a bookstore in Tel Aviv where I remember finding a treasure trove of his works in Hebrew. Luckily, the books were used, so I could afford them.

When my wife and I moved to Canada in 1984 I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. in psychology. Since we were place bound, I applied only to the University of Manitoba and got accepted into a Ph.D. I wanted to get into the clinical program but I was not admitted into it. They offered me instead a spot in the Personality program, which I gladly took. There I met my wonderful advisor Freddy Marcuse, who shared my worldview. Freddy was a cousin of Hebert Marcuse, who was one of the famous members of the Frankfurt School, along with Erich Fromm.

As a licensed school psychologist, I worked at the Child Guidance Clinic of Winnipeg during my Ph.D. studies. Working with kids from disadvantaged families solidified my desire to understand psychological problems in light of social problems. Working with clinicians who ignored social problems strengthened my interest in exploring how psychology masked social injustice. My own observations of how school psychology was being used to deflect social injustice, along with my early readings of Dorfman, Erich Fromm, and other critical thinkers, catalyzed my dissertation project.

Once I conceptualized the project, I had to convince the department to approve my proposal. With support from Freddy, we put together a committee that consisted of four psychology professors, one philosopher, and one professor of English who specialized in Marxist theory. I had six full professors in my committee, and they all had approved the idea of a philosophical critique of psychology, but the department had a policy of giving the proposal to a “shadow” reviewer, who was not part of the committee. That “shadow” professor rejected the project.

It took some courage and determination to stand up to the rather conservative department of psychology and insist that, first, a theoretical dissertation was warranted; and second, I was capable of writing one. After a few agonizing weeks of back and forth among myself, my advisor, and the department chair, my proposal was approved. My dissertation was a critical review of major schools of thought in psychology, including psychoanalysis, behaviorism, cognitivism, and humanism. The dissertation also critiqued applied fields such as clinical, school, and industrial/organizational psychology. The main thrust of my argument was that social context was missing from all these fields of theory and practice. Consequently, psychology was handmaiden to society. If all our problems are psychological in nature, there is no need to reform social structures (Prilleltensky 1989, 1994).

The first battle, to get departmental approval for the project, was won, but I still needed to prove that my research was worthy of publication, the standard by which dissertations were measured. Determined to prove to my committee that my work was publishable, I decided to submit a summary of my argument for publication, before I completed the dissertation. I submitted it to the *American Psychologist* and got it published there a few weeks before my defense (Prilleltensky, 1989). The timing could not be better.

Proposal, check. Committee, check. Publication, check. Now I had to convince an external examiner, outside of the University of Manitoba, that my work was original, relevant, scholarly, and important. I submitted names of three distinguished psychologists who could act as reviewers of my dissertation: George Albee, Ed Sampson, and Seymour Sarason. The department chose to send it to George Albee, who had been president of the American Psychological Association, and was an outspoken critic of the psychology establishment. George wrote a glorious review of my dissertation, which helped.

Over the years, I got to know George and Seymour pretty well, and I met Ed at conferences. The three of them were role models for me, and I owe them much gratitude for their mentorship and inspiration. As a young scholar challenging the establishment it was vital to find role models. George and Seymour, with whom I developed a close relationship over the years, were absolutely wonderful to me. George wrote for me several letters of recommendation for jobs, and Seymour wrote a review for *Contemporary Psychology* (now called *PsycCritiques*) of my first book, *The Morals and Politics of Psychology: Psychological Discourse and the Status Quo* (Prilleltensky, 1994), which was an outgrowth of my dissertation.

Throughout the dissertation process I felt pretty lonely, especially because I had chosen an unusual route, and because my topic was not mainstream. Neither the methods nor the contents were conventional. Reading the work of Sarason, Albee, and Sampson was very inspirational. The three of them were well established psychologists who challenged the discipline to pay more attention to social context and social justice. Reaching out to them required a bit of courage, as I was just a young academic, but they responded in very caring and warm ways. It was wonderful to experience affirmation from distinguished and admired colleagues.

At the University of Manitoba I felt like an outsider. Being an immigrant, choosing an unconventional topic for my research, and working at the Child Guidance Clinic – sometimes full time – during my studies prevented me from integrating fully into the life of the department. I hadn’t imagined pursuing an academic career until the very end of my degree, at which point I started publishing. Following the publication of the *American Psychologist* paper my advisor urged me to consider an academic career. I was thrilled to have published a paper in a very prestigious journal. Soon after publication I started getting very positive feedback. I had tasted from the forbidden fruit of publishing, and there was no going back.

Upon completion of the doctoral program I continued working at the Child Guidance Clinic. However, I reduced my load to part time to devote time to writing. I used material from my dissertation to publish several papers that would help me land an academic job. I got two job interviews, and was very lucky to get a position in the community psychology program at Wilfrid Laurier University, in Waterloo, Ontario. I found there an intellectual home, and a wonderful mentor, my dearest friend and colleague Geoff Nelson. Geoff is one of the best psychologists I’ve ever met. He is a leading figure in community psychology, and a wonderful researcher, scholar, teacher, and social justice activist. Geoff introduced me to colleagues and helped in myriad ways.

At Wilfrid Laurier I remained a *sui generis* professor. I got tenure on the basis of mostly theoretical and philosophical writings. Although I had begun publishing some of my community-based research, it was the strength of my theoretical, moral, and political writings that helped me get tenure. Building on my dissertation work, I participated in the development of the critical psychology movement (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009; Prilleltensky, 1994). While my publication career was going well, it took a second paper in the *American Psychologist* in 1997 to bring some attention to my scholarship (Prilleltensky, 1997).

That paper required some courage and determination. The article dealt with values, assumptions and practices in major fields of psychology and proposed an emancipatory-communitarian approach to well-being. The paper was sent back to me by the editor of the *American Psychologist* without review. There was a form letter attached to the note from the editor. The form listed several possible reasons why the paper was not going to be sent for review. Most of the reasons had to do with the fact that the paper was not perceived to be relevant to a wide audience of psychologists. In response, I sent a polite but assertive letter to the editor contesting his decision not to send the paper for review. The editor ultimately sent the paper to several reviewers and it was eventually published. This 1997 paper got a lot of attention from a variety of quarters in psychology.

At that point, publishing had become not only an intellectual outlet but a social one as well. I met wonderful colleagues who first wrote to me about my papers, and with whom I developed lasting friendships, like Dennis Fox. With Dennis we edited the first edition of *Critical Psychology: An Introduction* (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997). Until I met Dennis I thought I knew how to write, but working with him made me very humble and a much better writer. Dennis taught me how to write succinctly. He is one of the best writers I know, and from whom I had the privilege of learning the craft of good prose. It was good to know though that there were folks more obsessive than me when it came to publishing. Thank you Dennis.

By the mid-nineties community psychology had become my professional home. I felt very welcome and appreciated in this wonderful field. Through conferences of the Division of Community Psychology the American Psychological Association, The Society for Community Research and Action, I met inspiring colleagues doing important work at the intersection of what I came to call wellness and fairness (Prilleltensky, 2012).

Without the support of critical and community psychologists around the world I could not have maintained my convictions. Herein lies my strongest recommendation for young scholars: reach out to role models and enlist their support.

While the fields of critical and community psychology posited valid critiques of the status quo, within psychology and within society, they were not without limitations. I admonished critical psychology for its lack of social action (Davidson et al., 2006), and community psychology for its lack of attention to structural power (Prilleltensky, 2003, 2008). I needed to find a vocabulary to raise the commitment of both critical and community psychology to social transformation. I developed a new construct: *psychopolitical* *validity*. Hitherto, the concept of validity in psychology had been restricted to empirical methodologies. I introduced the notions of *epistemic* and *transformative* *psychopolitical* validity to bring attention to psychological and political power to understand and change society, respectively.

Following approximately a decade of research dealing with the moral dimensions of psychology, I turned my attention to the promotion of well-being in applied settings. I wanted to translate theory into practice. I published a few books striving to integrate psychological with social change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006).

To integrate my emerging insights about well-being into a concise paradigm I developed an approach called SPEC, which stands for *S*trengths, *P*revention, *E*mpowerment and *C*ommunity change (Prilleltensky, 2005). Based on work with social services and community-based organizations I realized that most efforts to improve well-being were flawed on four counts. The dominant models of help were (1) *D*eficit-oriented, (2) *R*eactive, (3) *A*lienating, and (4) *I*ndividualistic (the DRAIN approach).

The SPEC model was innovative in its synthesis of helping modalities into several continua. The time and place of help intersect into what I call the *contextual field.* Help can be proactive or reactive (time continuum), individualistic or collective (place of help continuum). The focus on participation and competencies intersect into what I labelled the *affirmation field*. Help can focus on strengths or deficits (capability continuum), and helpers can include citizens or alienate them in the process of help (participation continuum).

This model guided my community-based work for several years (Bess et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2011). It was clear to me that, unless we radically changed how we address psychosocial problems, professional helpers were doomed to reproduce the societal status quo. My critique of the helping professions argued that most approaches followed the DRAIN approach. They were deficit-oriented, reactive, alienating of the people they wanted to help, and by and large blamed the victims. This is largely a vestige of the medical model, which is highly reactive, expert-driven, and arrogant. The SPEC model builds on people’s strengths and assets. This is the only way to accord people the dignity they deserve. Moreover, people who struggle with psychosocial problems must be included in crafting solutions to their problems as opposed to the infantilization embodied in the medical model. Finally, the SPEC approach addresses structural injustice, as opposed to individual inadequacies.

A consistent theme throughout my career has been the integration of psychological with social well-being. I came to call this dual concern *wellness as fairness* (Prilleltensky, 2012). Without social fairness there cannot be personal wellness. Furthermore, to develop a sense of mattering, that our lives count, we require wellness and fairness. Mattering depends on recognition and impact (Prilleltensky, 2014). To feel recognized, valued, and appreciated, we need to experience wellness and fairness. These are social attributes. The recognition we gain from others, that we are valued, accepted and welcomed, derives from psychological nourishment and from interpersonal and communal justice. To make an impact, in turn, we must experience both self-efficacy and opportunities in life. Without equal opportunity, or fair opportunities, it is difficulty to experience impact.

The question of impact has concerned me for a long time. I realized that in order to move the needle on wellness and fairness psychologists must find innovative ways to reach large audiences. The public at large needs to be educated on the connections between mental health and social health, personal suffering and inequality, family well-being and community conditions (Marmot, 2015). This concern led me to find new ways to spread the word about wellness and fairness. First, I started writing serious newspaper articles. Initially I wrote a few articles for the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, my local paper in Ontario. Then I published a couple of pieces in the *Toronto Star* and *Maclean’s*, Canada’s leading weekly. With time, I found a more engaging way to talk about social issues: humor. In the last three years I’ve been using satire to discuss topics related to personal and community well-being through my blog, *Going Wellnuts* (<http://prilleltensky.blogspot.com>), and newspaper columns in the *Miami Herald* and *Miami Today.*

To deliver a message that could be heard by many people, without eliciting defensive responses, I framed issues of well-being in terms of six dimensions: Interpersonal, Community, Occupational, Physical, Psychological, and Economic (I COPPE, pronounced *I cope*). Domains such as community, occupational and economic well-being touch on justice and fairness and their impact on quality of life, happiness, and personal satisfaction (Prilleltensky et al., 2015). In my humor writings I use the I COPPE framework to illuminate the connections between wellness and fairness.

Humor turned out to be not just an effective tool of mass communication, but also a very enjoyable one. In the summer of 2015 I received an award from the National Newspaper Association for second best humor column. Encouraged by positive feedback and popular resonance, I wrote a humor book on well-being, *The Laughing Guide to Well-Being: Using Humor and Science to Become Happier and Healthier* (Prilleltensky, in press).

Trying to get a humor book published required not so much courage and innovation as perseverance. Since I was not very well-known as a humor writer, it took a while to convince a publisher that I could combine humor with science to deliver an engaging message. I found it much more difficult to publish a popular book than an academic book.

My pursuit of engaging modalities took me from humor to technology. Given the ubiquitous nature of mobile devices and computers, I decided to develop a platform with games, videos, and coaching sessions online. Together with an amazing team of colleagues, including a software engineer, professors and producers from the School of Communication at the University of Miami, psychologists, methodologists, educators, and Ph.D. students at the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, we developed *Fun For Wellness.* This is an online program designed to teach essential skills for well-being. Built around vignettes with real actors, we introduce skills related to seven drivers of change: *B*ehaviors, *E*motions, *T*houghts, *I*nteractions, *C*ontext, *A*wareness, and *N*ext steps (BET I CAN). My wife Dr. Ora Prilleltensky wrote most of the contents of the program, while the rest of the team helped with the creation of games and interactive features of the platform. Adam McMahon, our software engineer, created singlehandedly an amazing online program full of engaging activities.

To evaluate the effectiveness of *Fun For Wellness* we conducted a randomized controlled trial with close to 500 participants. The results, which are being written up at the moment, are very encouraging. Compared to the control group, people in the experimental condition report improvements in self-efficacy and in most I COPPE domains of well-being (Myers, Prilleltensky, Prilleltensky, McMahon, Dietz, and Rubenstein, in preparation). This intervention has the potential to reach thousands of people in cost-effective and engaging ways.

This exciting project required not only innovation, but a great deal of perseverance as well. Since we did not have major funding for it, we could not hire a team of software developers or subcontract the technical aspects to a software company. We also had to write and produce 36 videos. That required hiring professional actors, producing, and editing about two hours of work, which is more than a regular feature film. We had to be both patient and creative to produce a low-cost, high-quality psychoeducational intervention online.

When I reflect back on several projects I was involved in, from my dissertation to promoting critical psychology to publishing humor to developing online interventions, a common factor emerges: delay of gratification.

A sense of mattering derives from multiple ways to have impact. Writing scholarly and humor pieces is a form of impact. Developing online interventions is another. Leadership is a form of impact that I had not yet tried in any formal way until ten years ago. At that time I decided to pursue a leadership role in academia. I became Dean of the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami in 2006. Delay of gratification would also serve me well in the deanship.

One of my major goals as Dean was to synergize three departments which dealt with different aspects of well-being. *Teaching and Learning* dealt mostly with educational development, *Exercise and Sport Science* with physical well-being and *Educational and Psychological Studies* with psychological well-being. To unify the school we created a new vision statement: *To be a center of excellence in the study, promotion, and integration of psychological, physical, and educational well-being in multicultural communities.* It required some ingenuity to create a common purpose that would build on the strengths of different strands of the school. To further the cause of unity, we needed to change the name of the school from *School of Education* to something that would resonate with all members of our faculty. Following several rounds of conversations and consensus building, we changed the name of the school to *School of Education and Human Development*. Consensus building, patience, faculty participation, and a great dose of delay of gratification helped me achieve an important goal for the school.

To sharpen the focus on community well-being we developed a series of new programs. We built an undergraduate in Human and Social Development, a master’s program in Community and Social Change, and a Ph.D. in Community Well-Being. We also built a master’s program in Education and Social Change. These new programs train hundreds of students in theories and practices that blend wellness with fairness. Creating new programs is a form of impact.

I believe that impact, creativity and innovation derive from diversity of experiences. I grew up in Argentina, lived in Israel, Canada, Australia, and the United States. In addition to my three fluent languages (Spanish, Hebrew and English) I study Italian and Portuguese. Being exposed to different cultures and social policies enriches your reservoir of ideas. Reading from a variety of fields also helps. In my case, I always had an interest in moral and political philosophy, public health, social policy, and more recently humor. Collecting emotional, cultural, and intellectual experiences is the first step in innovation. The next step is doing something with these experiences. I like to incubate ideas. Before I commit to writing a paper or a proposal I draw diagrams, write words on pieces of paper, make connections among seemingly disparate ideas, and eventually create a meaningful and coherent concept. Since I’ve been asked by the editors to offer advice about working habits, here it is: do not write anything before you have a clear outline of what you’re going to write. Scholarly writing is like architecture. You wouldn’t dream of constructing the kitchen before knowing exactly the dimensions of the living room and bedrooms. Academic writing is the same. You have to have a clear blueprint of your argument before you produce a single sentence.

Humor writing is totally different. That’s the reason why I like it so much. After years of thinking very analytically about ideas, humor affords me complete freedom and creativity with the sole purpose of generating laughter. Fusing my academic knowledge with my interest in humor has been a lot of fun. In humor, as in scholarly work, creativity emerges from connecting seemingly unrelated topics. It is all about making connections; logical ones in research, illogical ones in humor.

The editors have asked me to reflect also on risk-taking. I’ve moved countries four times. Sometimes, I knew exactly what I was getting into, but sometimes I didn’t. For example, moving to the South of the United States was a complete shock to us. We were living in Melbourne, Australia, when I was offered a job at Vanderbilt University. I was excited to work with wonderful colleagues at Vanderbilt in Peabody’s College of Education and Human Development, a wonderful school. I had some reservations however about living in a rather conservative part of the country. We took a risk as a family, for which I have to thank my incredible wife Ora and our amazing son Matan, who have been willing participants in our family adventures. As it turned out, we loved Vanderbilt but could not get used easily to Nashville.

Moving to Australia was also a bit of a risk. I had a very good position at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada, with wonderful and supportive colleagues. I was about to go for full professor in Canada when we started exploring Australia. I was invited to be a keynote speaker at the first International Conference in Critical Psychology in Sydney. I nearly rejected the invitation because I had done quite a bit of travel that year and did not have any funding. When the conference organizers offered to pay half of my trip I got convinced. I landed in Sydney in April of 1999 to attend two conferences back to back: the International Society for Theoretical Psychology and the Millennium Conference in Critical Psychology. A few hours after I landed in Sydney I called Ora, my wife, and told her that we should move to Australia. She thought I was crazy. Back in North America I attended the Biennial Conference of the Division of Community Psychology at Yale University, where my colleague from Melbourne, Adrian Fisher, told me that they were looking for a Research Chair in his department at Victoria University. Long story short I got the job and in December 1999 we moved to Australia, six months after I first visited Sydney. We took a risk as a family because other than Adrian we did not know anybody in Melbourne. I did not know much about Victoria University or higher education in general there. It was a risk worth taking though. Our family loved living in Australia for three years. We met incredible people and enjoyed learning about the culture.

If you’ve read thus far and haven’t fallen asleep yet, I wonder about your mental state. To make it up to you, let me end by offering some completely unproven advice:

1. If you think that writing an extensive outline is a waste of time, try submitting a paper without one.
2. Becoming an academic administrator is a wonderful thing. It’s like having a colonoscopy in the woods. Historically, it makes the inquisition look like a piece of cake.
3. If you ever doubted that psychologists can engage in unethical behavior, read the Hoffman report.
4. Try not to lose your parents at the age of eight. There are easier motivators to become a psychologist.
5. Some people’s theories may make you laugh, but never confuse humor with academic writing.
6. If you are going to change the world one client at a time, take good care of your health. Based on current epidemiological data and longevity studies, it will take you 23,778,934 years. Most importantly, become a vegan like me and hit the treadmill.
7. If you didn’t have a psychiatric disability before you read the new DSM, you will surely have one by the time you’re done.

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