

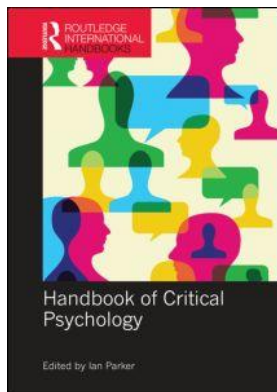
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Ian Parker

### **Community psychology**

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# Community psychology

## Subjectivity, power, collectivity

*David Fryer and Rachael Fox*

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In this chapter we address the topic of *community psychology* from a *critical* standpoint. First, we briefly explicate ‘critical’ frames of reference influential within community psychology and, in particular, the one within which we engage here as authors critical within and of community psychology. We then clarify what we are talking about when we discuss community psychology by reference to influential characterizations which are dominantly regarded as authoritative. We then consider some opportunities afforded by community psychology for enabling and promoting critique within and of the disciplinary practices of ‘psy’ and of oppressive practices. Finally, we consider problems with community psychology when considered within a critical frame of reference.

### **Critical frames of reference within community psychology**

Max Horkheimer positioned critical psychology as concerned with liberation of ‘human beings from the circumstances that enslave them’ (Horkheimer 1982: 244). Most community psychologists would agree with that but disagree about what enslaves human beings and so about what freedom from enslavement would entail. Many community psychologists claim that human beings are enslaved when their capacity for agentic self-determination as individual social and moral persons-in-context is restricted and disabled by powerful social forces, such as those operating through inequality, poverty, unemployment, or racism, with negative consequences for ‘wellness’ and social justice. Most versions of community psychology could be claimed to be ‘critical’ in the sense that they claim a commitment to ‘liberation’ of people from pathogenic, socially unjust enslavement through social and structural intervention which ‘empowers’ (e.g. Dalton et al. 2001, 2007; Nelson and Prilleltensky 2010; Orford 1992; Rappaport 1977). Whether these versions do actually liberate is quite another matter, of course.

Some community psychologists are fundamentally concerned with ‘enslavement’ by capitalism and draw heavily upon Marx, Marxian, and/or Marxist texts. Horkheimer (1982), one-time Director of the Institute for Social Research, more widely known as the Frankfurt School, whose members combined interests in Marxism, psychoanalysis, and anti-positivism, and Klaus Holzkamp (1983), former Professor at the Free University of Berlin, who is often positioned as a founder of ‘critical psychology’, are both still influential in some versions of community

psychology. Kagan et al. (2011), for example, who titled their recent book *Critical Community Psychology*, write with regard to using ‘critical’ that they have ‘set up two ideal types, with a clear bias as to the one that we are more comfortable with’ (12). The ‘more comfortable’ type for them is introduced by reference to ‘the Frankfurt School of Marxist intellectuals concerned with questions of culture and its relation to society (e.g. Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, Habermas)’ writing that in that context ‘what is meant by the term “critical” is an approach that tries to understand a social reality through introduction of another, more penetrating frame of reference, one that has to do with a general theory of human society (or at least late capitalist society) understood in terms of contradictions between different social interests and economic processes of exploitation, capital accumulation, and so on’ (12). Marxism is also a powerful influence on the work of contemporary South African community psychologists Seedat et al. (2001), who included a chapter entitled ‘Towards a Marxist community psychology’ in their textbook of community psychology.

Other community psychologists, including the authors of this chapter, position enslavement within a frame of reference which draws upon the work of Michel Foucault and has been developed by scholars like Joao Biehl, Judith Butler, and Nikolas Rose. Whilst they do not all accept the term ‘postmodern’, they are critical in many respects of modernist frames of reference and regard enslavement as having multiple loci of accomplishment, including compliance achieved through subjection/re-subjectivation, oppressive power-knowledge systems which take both productive and restrictive forms, and the broader project of governmentality (Fryer and Stambe 2014a; Fryer and Stambe 2014b; Marley and Fryer 2014; Nic Giolla Easpaig et al. 2014; Stambe et al. 2012).

Some versions of critique within community psychology are mutually inconsistent. Mainstream community psychology is problematic from both Marxist and Foucauldian standpoints. Marxist community psychologies are problematic from a Foucauldian standpoint because the Marxist approach to power is regarded as problematic and Marxism is regarded as a modernist grand narrative riddled with governmentality-achieving prescriptions and proscriptions. From a Marxist point of view, Foucauldian critique is positioned as problematic. Kagan et al. (2011: 12) characterized ‘another common use of “critical” . . . at its worst (and most postmodern) as “almost” meaning “say what you like” . . . part of the “society of the spectacle”, of consumerism, of capitalism itself’.

### What we are talking about when we discuss ‘community psychology’?

In a popular United Statesian community psychology textbook, Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005, 2010) summarize ‘themes that have been consistent over time’ in community psychology. According to Nelson and Prilleltensky, community psychology is distinguished from ‘traditional applied psychology’ by: *ecological levels of analysis*; problems being ‘reframed in terms of *social context and cultural diversity*’; *focus upon ‘competence/strengths’*; early, preferably *preventative, intervention* to promote *‘competence and wellness’*; emphasis on *‘self-help/community development/social action’*; positioning of the ‘client’ as an *‘active participant who exercises choice and self-direction’*; positioning of the professional as a *‘resource collaborator (scholar-activist)’*; and an *‘emphasis on social ethics, emancipatory values and social change’* (2005: 5). Similar accounts of community psychology can be found in most United Statesian textbooks (e.g. Dalton et al. 2001, 2007; Kloos et al. 2012; Levine and Perkins 1997; Rappaport 1977).

This account is mirrored on the website of the Society for Community Research and Action – Community Psychology (SCRA), Division 27 of the American Psychological Association

(<http://www.scra27.org/about>). The SCRA ‘vision’ includes the statement that SCRA will have an ‘impact on *enhancing well-being and promoting social justice* for all people by *fostering collaboration* where there is division and *empowerment* where there is oppression’. The SCRA ‘mission statement’ and the society’s four principles also include the following terms: ‘its members are committed to *promoting health and empowerment* and to *preventing problems*’; ‘*respect for diversity among peoples and settings*’; ‘*Human competencies* and problems are best understood by *viewing people within their social, cultural, economic, geographic, and historical contexts*’; ‘*active collaboration among researchers, practitioners, and community members*’; and ‘*promote competence and well-being*’. The version of community psychology found in Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005, 2010) and on the SCRA web pages is again mirrored extraordinarily closely by the entry on community psychology in Wikipedia.

Individual *international* textbooks echo this account. For example, in *Community Psychology and Social Change: Australian and New Zealand Perspectives*, Thomas and Veno (1996: 25) summarize the core values and principles for an Australian and New Zealand community psychology as: ‘*empowerment, social justice, diversity and cultural pluralism, cultural awareness, social innovation, evaluation, community development and participation, collaboration and partnership, an ecological approach, systems perspectives, prevention and localisation*’.

‘What do people actually do when they are doing community psychology?’, Orford (1992: 8,4) asks rhetorically, in his influential British textbook. He answers that his Table 1 ‘provides one answer in brief, and the remaining chapters of this book . . . provide the same answer at much greater length’. Roughly summarized, the chapters address: *ecological levels of analysis and intervention; social support; power and control; methodological eclecticism; collaborative working; prevention; organizational change; self-help and non-professional help; and community empowerment*.

One could continue ad infinitum, giving examples of similar accounts of community psychology. Does this constitute a form of convergent validity? Have versions of community psychology sprung up independently in different places at different times and converged on the most effective and coherent ways to ‘do’ community psychology? We pursue such issues later but for now we consider the following:

### *Some opportunities afforded by community psychology for critique*

Whenever and wherever it is taught, community psychology can open a space in the undergraduate psychology degree for engagement in critique by under- and postgraduates, when critical psychology would be much more difficult or impossible to get into the syllabus. For example, in terms of content, through community psychology, the teacher has the potential to introduce into the undergraduate psychology syllabus at least traces of: ‘history of the present’ of psychology; philosophy of science; sociology of knowledge; text based research methods; emancipatory disability research; feminist theory; anti-psychiatry; Marxist thinking; post-structural thinking; and decolonizing methodology. Community psychology provides opportunities to begin critique of: the dogma of value-free science; intellectual colonization; positivism; universalism; victim blaming approaches; the medical model of disability; and the hegemonic psy construction and reproduction of the decontextualized individual. Through how community psychology is taught, there is the potential to provide opportunities for undergraduates to appreciate that vast amounts of sophisticated effective work addressing ‘psychological oppression’ is done by people without psychology, or indeed any, degrees. The existence of an approach which is conceptually, methodologically, and politically different from the mainstream but also itself mainstream in that it is recognized as a legitimate part of the discipline (by Section status in the British Psychological Society, by College status in the

Australian Psychology Society and eligibility for practice endorsement with the Psychology Board of Australia, by Division status in the American Psychology Association, by Associate Membership status of the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations in the case of the European Community Psychology Association [<http://www.efpa.eu/associate-members>] etc.) communicates to students the possibility of employment in community psychology with potential to engage in aspects of critique. Courses in community psychology in higher education institutions also potentially allow the employment of critical psychologists to teach community psychology. Community psychology conferences provide spaces for critical subgroups to meet and debate. Community psychology *Sections* or *Divisions* or *Colleges* can allow critical voices to potentially influence national policy. Community psychology forums (e.g. <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=COMMUNITYPSYCHUK>) can provide spaces for the development of critique and solidarity. In practice, the radicality of critique which has flourished in such spaces has so far been modest and community psychologists are as prone, maybe more, to close critique down as any other manifestations of the psy-complex, but community psychology affords opportunities for critique at least in theory. Most importantly, community psychology can sometimes survive, albeit against tremendous odds, where critical psychology would be less likely to survive and create spaces for resistance. A community psychology master's programme has been established at Birzeit University in the West Bank, in which community psychology is positioned as taking a stand against repression and state violence, and naming the source of oppression and doing so under military occupation. As the developer of this programme, Makkawi puts it as (this volume): 'envisioning critical psychology in the Arab World in general, is better conceived through critical community psychology as an emerging alternative to colonial psychology'.

### *Community psychology: some problems*

As shown above, there are huge numbers of uncannily similar or even near identical definitions and explications of community psychology, explicitly or implicitly, in textbooks, in journal articles, on professional society websites, on forums, given by lecturers in class, or implicit in the practices, procedures, and techniques of practitioners. These apparently authoritative definitions are repeated by the most famous and well-travelled celebrity professors in invited presentations at prestigious conferences, in the most cited textbooks and the journals which count most in the Key Performance Indicator stakes. But how is such authority to define and explicate constituted and legitimated? Whose interests are served by the legitimation of such definitions and explications? Should that authority be resisted? What are the consequences of such community psychological knowledge claims, related practices, technologies, enunciated values, organizational structures, means of subjection and governmentality and so forms of power thus constituted and deployed in theory and action?

Within our critical frame of reference, some definitions and explications being repeated more often, in more forums, with more assurance than others tells us more about the communication and other privileges of the definers than it does about the definitions: the dominant definitions of community psychology are the definitions of the most powerful vested interests.

The most prestigious community psychology journals are United Statesian (*American Journal of Community Psychology* and *Journal of Community Psychology*). The majority of community psychology textbooks are written by United Statesian authors. There are more graduate courses generating credentialed community psychologists in the United States than anywhere else. The most powerful community psychology professional organization (SCRA) is United Statesian. In turn the SCRA, which has its own dedicated and influential formal, *Journal of Community*

*Psychology*, and informal magazine, *The Community Psychologist*, convenes the biggest national biennial conference of community psychology, manufactures the most awarded community psychology academics, and promotes community psychology origin stories which position the beginnings of community psychology in the USA amid domestic US political events.

Not surprisingly, a United Statesian version of community psychology has become globally dominant. This is not disputed even by United Statesian community psychologists, but neither is it positioned by them as problematic. Writing in the influential *Handbook of Community Psychology*, edited by Rappaport and Seidman (2000), Wingefeld and Newbrough were able to refer to community psychology, or closely related work, in: Aotearoa/New Zealand, Argentina, Asia, Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy, Mexico, The Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Panama, Poland, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, South Africa, Spain, the UK, the USA, and Venezuela. Reading Reich et al., (2007) would lead one to add: Cameroon, Ghana, Greece, India, Japan, Portugal, Spain, and Turkey to that list. That would still exclude France and Palestine, where interesting current developments are locally identified as community psychological, and Austria, where a version of community psychology was, arguably, developed in the 1930s (Fryer 2008a; Jahoda and Fryer 1998).

Wingefeld and Newbrough (2000: 779) discursively positioned United Statesian community psychology as 'a sub-discipline of psychology' 'created at a conference' in the USA. They assert that 'the development of community psychology in most of the countries discussed here was stimulated by internal social needs, developments, and conceptualizations *and influences from the U.S. sources*' (780). Only in two countries do they argue otherwise: 'Poland and Cuba are the two countries where influences from U.S. community psychology have been minimal' (Wingefeld and Newbrough 2000: 780). That may have been the case in 2000, but not today: *International Community Psychology: History and Theories* (Reich et al. 2007) contains a chapter on community psychology in Poland (Bokszczanin et al. 2007). It has only one reference: Dalton et al. (2001). The authors refer to a survey they did of psychology departments in Polish universities, inviting respondents to provide 'their own definition of community psychology' (352). The authors wrote: 'to assess the fidelity of these definitions, we used as an anchor a broad definition of community psychology as a discipline seeking to understand and to enhance quality of life for individuals, communities, and society', adding in a footnote 'we chose Dalton et al.'s definition because of its elegant inclusiveness of the multitude of aims and values generally associated with community psychology in the West' (352).

Orford (1992: 4) admits of Table 1, which he says provides the source of answers to the question of what people actually do when they are doing community psychology, that 'this table is taken, much modified, from one in Rappaport's (1977) book'. In like vein, Raviv et al. (2007) wrote in *Community Psychology in Israel*: 'the principles of community psychology, to which we shall refer throughout the chapter, are based on the principles delineated by Levine and Perkins (1997) and mainly include early identification, prevention, mental health consultation, crisis intervention, and the use of community resources and strengths' (Reich et al. 2007: 335). Here we see US community psychology being transposed lock, stock, and barrel to Israel.

The contrast between Israeli United Statesian community psychology and Palestinian community psychology, as explicated by Makkawi (2009), is very stark. Writing in the *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*, Palestinian community psychologist Ibrahim Makkawi suggests 'it is possible to place the various traditions of community psychology on a continuum, where at the individualistic and reductionist end of the continuum we can locate the USA school of community psychology, whereas, at the transformative and liberationist end of the continuum we locate the Latin American school of community psychology' (Makkawi 2009: 76). He continues: 'the Palestinian experience with protracted colonialism, occupation

and oppression shares a great deal of similarities and interrelated international colonial practices with the people of Latin America as well as that of South Africa' (Makkawi 2009: 77).

Wingenfeld and Newbrough (2000) also assert: 'community psychology in the United States strongly influenced Australia and New Zealand', that in Canada 'the re-emergence of community psychology in the 1970s was associated with influences of community psychology in the U.S.' (following the abandonment in the 1950s of 'a community orientation and strong emphasis on prevention initiated by Canadian pioneers!'). 'Abandonment' of one community orientation and replacement by a United Statesian community orientation is, of course, in need of critical historical scrutiny in the context of discussion of intellectual colonisation. Wingenfeld and Newbrough (2000: 780, 782) also assert that 'the Interamerican Society for Psychology provided the vehicle for interchange between U.S. and Latin American psychologists about work in the community'. An indication of the urge to dominate the definition, explication, and constitution of community psychology is provided by the vigorous defence and reinstatement of a United Statesian approach to community psychology in response to challenges to it made transparent on Wikipedia. For an instructive lesson regarding the symbolic importance of this issue to some, see the history of changes via the 'view history' tab and in particular: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Community\\_psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Community_psychology).

As most versions of community psychology found around the world summarized at the start of this chapter are in large part a product of United Statesian intellectual colonization, it is not surprising that they have much in common. It might be argued that this is not a problem if the United Statesian intellectual export is effective, unproblematic, and of universal relevance.

We do not believe this dominance is unproblematic. The United Statesian form of community psychology not only draws on the mainstream Anglo-Saxon positivist modernist psychological disciplinary tradition, literatures, and frames of reference, rather than critical ones (Coimbra et al. 2012: 139), but also reinscribes and reinforces acritical psy.

The United Statesian intellectual export of community psychology is especially problematic in the way it engages with oppression and power. Whilst some United Statesian community psychologists position their approach as opposing oppression at a community level, engaging with, for example, the consequences of: homelessness (Toro et al. 2008); disability (White 2005); and heteronormativity (Harper 2005), engagement with 'power' is often uncritical, despite claims to the contrary. In a critical examination of one framing of power within an influential community psychology frame of reference by Prilleltensky (2008), Fryer (2008b: 243) concluded: 'the notion of power recommended has been found to be ill-defined, circular, question-begging, problematic in terms of community psychology with its dependence on need satisfaction, rooted in an underlying interpersonal relationship model, infected with individualism and psychologism, and problematically stuck within the old debate about agency and structure. It is suggested that power is better understood as a property, or dynamic, of social systems than of the individuals within it and that the apparent power of individuals is best understood as the subjective manifestation of the societal distribution of power'. See Fryer and Laing (2008) for a critique of a mainstream acritical community psychology approach to disabling practices; and Fryer 2014; Fryer and Stambe 2014a; Fryer and Stambe 2014b for critiques of mainstream psychological work on unemployment.

Dominant community psychology rhetoric emphasizes transparency and accountability, but acritical community psychologists seldom problematize the disempowerment embedded within their own fields and practices. As Parker (2007: 144–145) observed, pragmatic issues to do with community psychologists being obliged to 'gain access' to a community and to avoid being thrown out so that they can complete work agreed in advance as a condition of funding usually result in 'patterns of violence' remaining hidden and preexisting systems of power in the

community, sometimes oppressive power systems, being left unchallenged or even reinforced. Fox (2013) reveals some such structures of power and problematic practices in community research with young people, and argues that academic community psychological research is hampered by dominant discourses in research itself as well as the field. Coimbra et al. (2012) suggest that 'community' can be used to justify othering and subordination and that the very notion of community, and how it is deployed, is in need of critique. Although community psychologists tend to emphasize action, intervention, and prevention, at least rhetorically, to a far greater extent than critical psychologists, much of the action of community psychologists is politically conservative, ideologically problematic, and acritical in theorization. More progressive and more important social action research is arguably done by: critical feminist psychologists (e.g. Burman and Chantler 2005); community activists (e.g.; Fryer, D. and McCormack 2012; Fryer, D. and McCormack 2013; McCormack 2009); emancipatory disability activists (e.g. Oliver 1992); and survivors of psychiatry (Stambe and Fryer 2014; Stambe et al. 2012).

## In conclusion

Foucault (1978/1990: 266) states that 'critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself [sic] the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth'. Our bigger project in relation to community psychology means, in terms of this, that when we use the word 'truth' in relation to community psychology we use it as a verb: we are thus interested not in which community psychology claims are 'true' but rather: which community psychology statements have been truthed (given the status of truth); how the community psychological 'truthing' was or is warranted (how community psychology authority was or is constructed and deployed); which regimes of truth have been enacted by community psychologists and what the consequences are for whom in which ways; whose interests are served by truthed community psychology statements, and the power relations which are inseparable from interconnected community psychological claims that have been truthed; which interconnected systems of truthed community psychological claims have been 'knowledged' (given the status of knowledge), and which community psychological practices and techniques have been evidentialized (given the status of 'known evidence-based effectiveness').

For us, the dominant, ubiquitous, mainstream version of community psychology discussed above, which is widely claimed by its proselytizers to: promote wellness; liberate; promote social justice; and to 'empower', is actually, as Seedat et al. (2001: 4) assert, characterized by 'discriminatory approaches', 'hegemonic and epistemological domination', and 'an accommodationist position seeking greater influence within the mainstream fraternity' and does not challenge the 'restrictions and outcomes imposed by exploitative economic arrangements and dominant systems of knowledge production', instead drawing on the mainstream Anglo-Saxon positivist modernist psychological disciplinary tradition, literatures, and frames of reference, rather than critical ones. It is problematic in all the above respects but, compared with Marxist and Foucauldian versions, most problematic because it is a re-inscription of a superficially liberalized version of the mainstream psy-complex, 'the heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise' (Rose 1999: vii), with its origins in the United States, indeed, a version of psy which may turn out to be integral to governmentality through subjection and compliance in the twenty-first century under a neoliberal order. As Whitmarsh (2013: 303) observes, 'compliance is . . . becoming a principal public health issue of the twenty-first century, and compliance posits a figure with a responsibility to continually work to discipline the self into a biomedical subject'. Increasingly, Whitmarsh observes, global health expertise and governance organizes 'around a cultural and psychological concept



of the community. Compliance techniques attempt to affect community behaviours and cultural attitudes . . . expertise on predispositions' (prevention approaches) 'intersects with the current emphasis on access to "information" to fashion a new subject of compliance'. Within a critical frame of reference, people – community members or community psychologists – do not live outside, or prior to, community psychological power-knowledge but rather are continuously (re)constituted by being 'power-known' and coming to 'know', and be, themselves, i.e. power-knowledging themselves discursively through the discourses and associated dispositifs available to and inescapable by them, including community psychological discourses and dispositifs. Subjectivity, whether of community members or community psychologists, is not, within our critical frame of reference, a problematic alternative to objective knowledge, as it is to positivist-inspired acritical quantitative community psychologists, nor a source of authenticity, as it is to post-positivist acritical qualitative social scientists who appeal to the notion of 'lived experience', but rather a continuously reproduced phenomenon whose social constitution and reconstitution is to be explained and whose implications are to be subjected to critique.

Although United Statesian community psychology is problematic, much important work is going on in the USA in relation to understanding subjection/resubjectivation and compliance. Butler's work is foundational. As Butler (1997:2) writes: "Subjection" signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject. Whether by interpellation, in Althusser's sense, or by discursive productivity, in Foucault's, the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power'. Butler observes that 'although Foucault identifies the ambivalence in this formulation, he does not elaborate on the specific mechanisms of how the subject is formed in submission'. Butler pursues this issue through critical scholarship, but Biehl (2005) pursues it through critical anthropological research involving 'on-the-ground study of a singular Other' in which he uncovered the 'immense parcelling out of the specific ways communities, families and personal lives are assembled', exploring 'how inner worlds are remade under the impress of economic pressures' (Biehl 2005:8), and how 'inner and outer states are inescapably sutured' (Biehl 2005:10) (see also Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007). The most sophisticated, progressive, and exciting contemporary community psychology in the sense of approaches which engage with subjectivity, power, and collectivity are arguably not done today by community psychologists, or by psychologists at all, but transdisciplinary critical activists and scholars.

## Further reading

Biehl, J. (2005) *Vita: Life in a Zine of Social Abandonment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## Website resources

British Psychological Society Community Psychology Section: <http://cps.bps.org.uk/>

Society for Community Research and Action/Division 27 of the American Psychological Association: <http://www.scra27.org/>

UK Community psychology discussion list: <http://www.jisemail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=COMMUNITYPSYCHUK>

Wikipedia definition of community psychology: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community\\_psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_psychology)

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