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## Forging Political Will from a Shared Vision: A Critical Social Justice Agenda Against Neoliberalism and Other Systems of Domination

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Forging Political Will from a Shared Vision: A Critical Social Justice Agenda

Against Neoliberalism and Other Systems of Domination

Renato M. Liboro, PhD

**Abstract**

Due to pervasive inequalities and inequities in society, many people have a difficult time envisaging a just society; let alone how to go about actualizing such an aspiration. A critical reflection on the concept of a just society and the role that community psychologists and other advocates can play in upholding a critical social justice agenda in their research and civic engagement, particularly against neoliberalism and other systems of domination, is discussed. As part of a proffered framework, four tasks are proposed to fulfill the role: 1) raising public critical consciousness, 2) convincing people of the possibility of change, 3) creating a vision shared by the community, and 4) forging a political will from the shared vision. Accompanying strategies are provided in the discussion of each of the tasks of the suggested framework.

*Keywords: social justice, neoliberalism, political will, collaboration, civic engagement*

The desire to promote social justice is an aspiration that can be found in various academic fields and professions. As a sub-discipline of the study of Psychology, Community Psychology (CP) offers an approach for working with those marginalized by the social system that leads to self-aware social change with an emphasis on value-based, participatory work, and forging of alliances (Burton, Boyle, Harris, & Kagan 2007). As such, CP is one alternative to the dominant individualistic Psychology typically taught and practiced in high-income countries. It is *Community Psychology* because it emphasizes a level of analysis and intervention other than the individual and their immediate interpersonal context; it is *Community Psychology* because it is nevertheless concerned with how people feel, think, experience, and act as they work together resisting oppression and struggling to create a better world (Burton, Boyle, Harris, & Kagan 2007). CP is concerned with the relationships of the individual to communities and society, and through collaborative research and action, community psychologists seek to understand and enhance quality of life for all individuals, communities, and society (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman 2001).

As a broader discipline, Psychology has traditionally focused on the individual level of analysis. While Applied Psychology sometimes pays attention to microsystems, such as the family and peer group, most of the major theories of Personality and Clinical Psychology emphasize individualistic explanations of behaviour and individual strategies of change. In contrast, CP is the sub-discipline that studies people in context, and applies a more holistic, ecological analysis of the person within multiple social systems, including macro-sociopolitical structures (Nelson & Prilleltensky 2010). In CP, social justice is regarded as one of many espoused core values, along with wellness, health, holism, sense of community, diversity, self-

determination, participation, collaboration, and accountability (Kloos et al. 2012; Nelson & Prilleltensky 2010).

### **Social Justice as a Community Psychology Core Value**

It is my belief that among the CP core values, social justice is the value that represents an ideal which community psychologists could only perpetually hope and strive for to achieve. Given that various people in distinct contexts define the concept of social justice in different ways (Community Foundations of Canada 2004; Reach & Teach 2014; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo 2012), the lack of consensus on its definition only makes it an even more difficult goal for advocates to achieve. While there are those who define it simply as “complete and genuine equality of all people” (Reach & Teach 2014), others would have a more specific definition of it and would describe it as “a concept based upon the belief that each individual and group within a given society has a right to civil liberties, equal opportunity, fairness, and participation in the educational, economic, institutional, social, and moral freedoms and responsibilities valued by the community” (Community Foundations of Canada 2004). The Center for Economic and Social Justice [CESJ] (2015) emphasizes that achieving social justice primarily depends on the attainment of economic justice, which they believe encompasses the moral principles that guide society in designing economic institutions. These institutions determine how each person earns a living, enters into contracts, exchanges goods and services with others, and otherwise produces an independent material foundation for their economic sustenance. The ultimate purpose of economic justice is to free each person to engage creatively in the unlimited work beyond economics, that of the mind and the spirit [CESJ, 2015]. In their attempt to provide a clearer and unified definition of social justice, Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, and Huo (2012) assembled the most current information related to social justice at the time of

their study, and found that in many sources, the underlying unifying theme is that individuals and communities care about issues of fairness in their interactions with other individuals, groups, and institutions they support or oppose, and that despite the fact that the goals of economic justice do not always line up with the goals of social justice, they believed that the goals of each did not always necessarily have to be incompatible and exclusive of one another.

Since a completely just society is admittedly a utopian concept that many would consider credulous and unattainable, my vision as a community psychologist of a just society is one wherein the decisions enacted systemically that affect the well-being and health of the majority of people are made based on the maximum participation of a socially aware, critically conscious, and politically involved public through a strong democratic process. Whether they would lead to greater equality, or even better, greater economic and health equity in society, I believe these decisions should be democratically determined by a more informed, responsible, and involved public. This is, I am convinced, where Community Psychology as a sub-discipline has a stake in the pursuit of a just society.

The role of community psychologists in creating and upholding a social justice agenda, therefore, for me, involves four formidable tasks. These four tasks, I posit, could be used as a framework for community psychologists to utilize, not only in their ongoing work, as some of them may already be committed to carrying out some or all of these tasks, but also in their future endeavours in the promotion of social justice.

In this paper, my primary purpose is to discuss these four tasks as a framework for the promotion of a social justice agenda. In the process, I will be focusing on neoliberalism as *one* particular example of a system of domination that oppresses a significant proportion of society, which needs to be addressed by community psychologists and other advocates for social justice.

While discussing each of the four tasks, I will be recommending a few concrete strategies that community psychologists and other advocates can consider and enact in the course of conducting their research and practice.

First, as they interact with various stakeholders in their research efforts to increase participant engagement for the purposes of developing collaboratively created data and true ownership of knowledge, community psychologists should consciously promote social awareness and critical consciousness in the community. CP advocates should also actively promote conscientization (Freire 1970) in fellow scholars and in policymakers in their capacity as educators and researchers in the university and legislative settings. Second, CP proponents should remain a constant source of optimism and stimulus for change in the communities they are engaged with in their research and practice. Because of the risk of inadvertently cultivating frustration and feelings of hopelessness while raising critical consciousness in the community, community psychologists should be constantly prepared to inspire others with the hope that change is possible. Third, community psychologists should facilitate the creation of a vision for a better society that is shared not only by collaborators from different fields advocating for social justice, but also by a well-informed, actively engaged, and inspired community. It is also during the execution of this task that the valuable input, collective aspirations, and personalized contributions of a socially aware, critically conscious, and involved citizenry are welcomed, encouraged, and amassed to cultivate consensus and solidarity in the community. The fourth task of CP advocates is to forge a political will from this shared vision that would be both resolute and ready to address causes of inequality, inequity, and injustice in different contexts in society. Although these tasks can be very demanding and challenging, community psychologists should be prepared to take them on and learn them until they become second nature in their work.

### **Raising Critical Consciousness**

First and foremost in creating and upholding a social justice agenda for CP is the task of assisting others in attaining a greater level of critical consciousness of their social reality in their communities. This task requires certain qualities and skills to facilitate the conscientization (Freire 1970) of different members of the community in different contexts, whether they are colleagues in the university, marginalized populations, allies, stakeholders in a particular social issue, policymakers, or simply “average” citizens of the community. Community psychologists themselves must have an appropriate degree of critical consciousness, apart from having personal attributes such as cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia 1998) and critical reflexivity (Alvesson & Skoldburg 2000) to facilitate consciousness-raising.

During the process of conscientization, community psychologists should be able to expose to the public the societal inequalities and inequities that are responsible for marginalizing and oppressing specific members of the community. They should be able to help members of the community distinguish and understand the presence, impact, and dynamics of power differentials in society that perpetuate these inequalities and inequities (Moane 2011), and be prepared to provide reliable evidence to support the information they present, which is often necessary to guide, and even sway, public opinion (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). One appropriate strategy is for CP proponents to collaborate with other social justice advocates and elicit active participation in research from the community that will allow for greater credibility and community ownership of results and knowledge produced as more convincing evidence to the public. They can initiate this process by first helping others identify systemic causes of inequities in society and then exposing the links between these systems of domination (Moane 2011) and the oppressive circumstances that adversely affect the well-being of different members of the community. By



deliberately pointing out the connections between causes of social injustices and people's hardships as evidence from the collaborative research that community members participated in emerges, community psychologists can strategically raise critical consciousness more effectively. Because the findings emanated from research which community members were actively a part of as collaborators, the resulting evidence becomes more real, meaningful, and convincing to them.

Although the discourse in her book, *Gender and Colonialism: A Psychological Analysis of Oppression and Liberation*, focused on exposing patriarchy and colonialism as systems of domination responsible for the oppression of women and indigenous populations in different contexts, Moane (2011) described the term "system of domination" as any hierarchical system, which is not consensual and involves institutionalized domination and inequality. In order to elaborate better in her discussions, she provided other more relatively known causes of inequity such as racism, heterosexism, and ageism, which have been exhaustively examined in published academic literature, as further examples of systems of domination that are prevalent in society.

**Neoliberalism as a System of Domination.** Compared to what many would consider more conventional systems of domination such as racism, colonialism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism, a system of domination in society that has only been increasingly gaining public attention in the last decade that community psychologists should keep in mind when facilitating public conscientization is neoliberalism. Due to the extensive popularity of non-fiction best-sellers, such as Thomas Piketty's (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* and Joseph Stiglitz' (2012) *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*, more civic scrutiny has been recently drawn to the impact of neoliberalism on society. Although Moane (2011) only mentioned neoliberalism briefly in her book and did not specify it

as a system of domination per se, she did identify it as cause of oppression in her discourse on the different problems that have been plaguing her native Ireland, and other Western countries, over the last couple of decades.

But what is neoliberalism? How is it different from capitalism and classic liberalism? Why did it emerge in the first place? Most importantly, how did it become a system of domination that has gained the power to oppress the greater majority of people in many societies all across the globe? Before I could use neoliberalism as an example of a system of domination that could be addressed by the framework I discuss in this paper, these questions need to be answered.

Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional foundation characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey 2005). In neoliberalism, the role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional foundation appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defense, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist, then they must be created, by state action if necessary. However, state interventions in markets, once created, must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market prices, and powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions for their own benefit (Harvey 2005).

Although neoliberalism has occasionally been confused and conflated with capitalism, they are two distinct terms that need to be differentiated. Whereas capitalism is widely known to

be a social and economic system in which industries and the means of production are privately owned and operated for profit, neoliberalism is a political theory and ideology that not only promotes capitalism's push for privatization, but also specifically promulgates deregulation, globalization, open markets, free trade, the removal of licence and quota systems, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision, as solutions to the challenges created or faced by capitalism (Harvey 2005; Lafferty 2013).

In his 1979 lecture series on bio-politics, Foucault differentiated neoliberalism from classic liberalism for his students since the two terms have also been commonly confused with one another even at that time (Burchell 1991; Rose 1996). According to Foucault, the two concepts differed mainly on their definition of the relationship between the economy and the state. The neoliberal concept inverts the earlier liberal model, which rested heavily on the historical experience of an absolute and omnipotent state. Unlike the state described in the classic liberal conceptualization, for proponents of neoliberalism, the state does not define and manage market freedom because the market itself is the regulating and controlling principle underlying the state. Foucault argued that, in neoliberalism, it is the market that controls the state, rather than the market being controlled by the state. In neoliberalism, the market *is* the regulating principle for the economy, the state, and society (Burchell 1991; Rose 1996).

Neoliberal thought gained a stronghold in many countries around the globe, such as the United States, England, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Chile, Portugal, and Argentina, due to the crisis of capital accumulation in the 1970s that adversely affected everyone through the combination of accelerating inflation and staggering unemployment (Harvey 2005; Hickel 2012). Widespread discontent led to urban social movements throughout the capitalist world that pointed towards the serious consideration of a socialist alternative to the social compromise

between labour and capital that grounded capital accumulation after the Second World War. Across Europe and the United States, forces agitated for fundamental reforms and state interventions, which presented a distinct political threat to the stature of economic elites and ruling classes, as asset values such as savings, property, and stocks plummeted and collapsed (Harvey 2005). The upper classes were forced to move quickly if they were to protect themselves from economic and political ruin. In the United States, a long deep recession that emptied factories and broke unions began, as the 1979 chairman of its Federal Reserve Bank, Paul Volcker, engineered a draconian shift in monetary policy through neoliberalization in response to the country's crisis of capital accumulation. This response was later tagged as the "Volcker shock" (Harvey 2005). Everything was deregulated, from telecommunications to airlines, so that market freedoms could be opened up for powerful corporate interests. Tax breaks on investments subsidized the unrestrained movement of capital, while American deindustrialization led to increased production abroad so that labour costs could be significantly cut at the expense of lost employment.

Neoliberalism supposedly became the antidote to threats to capitalist social order, as well as the solution to capitalism's ills. An exclusive group of passionate advocates – mostly academics in the field of Economy – gathered together and presented themselves as "liberals" committed to the ideals of personal freedom and free markets (Harvey 2005). It was through this so-called idealism that neoliberalism found its way to mainstream societal ideology and acceptance. The proponents of neoliberal thinking knew that for any way of thought to become dominant in society, a conceptual apparatus needs to be advanced in a manner that appeals to society's intuitions, instincts, values, and desires. They took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom, which were seductive and compelling ideals for many, as the "central values

of civilization”, and used them to figuratively market and sell neoliberalism to society (Harvey 2005). They depicted these idealistic values as threatened not only by fascism and communism, but also by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgements for those of individuals’ freedom to choose. In so doing, they presented neoliberalism as a political movement that values dignity and individual freedom, so that anyone who wished to uphold these values would naturally feel accepting of, and even obliged to support, neoliberalism.

Nearly at the same time, in other countries apart from the United States, neoliberalism was injected and absorbed in societal ideology through other means. Neoliberalism was introduced or negotiated either through coercion (i.e. military force in Chile) or financial means (i.e. International Monetary Fund [IMF] operations in Mozambique and the Philippines). The active construction of consent for neoliberalism, therefore, varied from one country to the next, depending on which means of domination was best and most effective (Harvey 2005).

While neoliberalism has been around since the late 1960’s (Hickel 2012) and has received considerably more attention in recent years, the majority of the general public outside of avid readers of best-selling non-fiction paperbacks, academics, and advocates, have yet to completely acquaint themselves with it. Because its notoriety only began to increase in the last decade compared to other systems of domination, community psychologists should be cognizant of the fact that although it may not necessarily be any more important than other systems of domination, it is certainly a cause of significant oppression that society needs to be able to recognize more. As more people begin to recognize that health and economic problems are largely due to inequalities and inequities present in society, they can also start to understand the role that neoliberalism plays in promoting extreme consumerism and capitalism (Hickel 2012), and learn the significant connection between these two facts. As the greater community realizes

how economic growth has in developed countries largely finished its work and led to the worsening income distribution in society today (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010), the more they can comprehend how neoliberalism has contributed to the huge disparities in the control and privilege between the oppressed poor majority and the few entitled rich. Community psychologists can help the public sector become aware of how neoliberal policies promote the implementation of free trade, open markets, supply-side economics, deregulation, contractualization, privatization, and economic liberalization (Hickel 2012), and how these policies extend the effects of neoliberalism beyond the confines of the market sector, economics, and legislation (Lafferty 2013). They can raise people's consciousness on how neoliberalism has essentially separated the worker from the means of production and the control of labor (Kovel 2002), and spread the avarice of capitalism to allow for the pollution of macrosystem institutions such as the healthcare system, global communications and technology, and the educational system, as well as the destruction of the world's natural resources for profit.

In the process of conscientization, the public can learn from CP advocates how in recent years, neoliberal philosophy has influenced the unjust delivery of primary care, unequal access to health services, lobbying power of the pharmaceutical industry, unscrupulous healthcare insurance practices, biomedical genetics research, and medical tourism, much to the detriment of the majority already marginalized from the decimation of organized labor (McKenna 2012; Smith 2012). Community psychologists can expose to the public how neoliberal orientation has instigated the outsourcing of the global market communications industry and the consequent increase in national unemployment rates, the enormous commercialism in communications technology, and the way overt consumerism is inculcated through mass and social media (Vander Schee & Kline 2013). People can then also discover that with the introduction of the

demand for standardized outcomes, the de-professionalization of academic staff, the application of differentiation and program prioritization, and the commodification of knowledge, how neoliberal agendas have permeated the halls of universities and institutions of higher learning, and have debased the integrity of educational systems in the last decade (Arvast 2006; Olssen & Peters 2010).

Furthermore, community psychologists and champions for environmental justice can help the public recognize the role of neoliberalism in the propagation of the directive of unfettered capitalism for ceaseless economic growth that has led to the wanton destruction of our planet and the marginalization of the people who depend on its natural resources the most (Ayma et al. 2011). In the book, *The Rights of Nature: The Case for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth*, Ayma and other environmental advocates (2011) brought much needed attention to the role of neoliberalism in establishing the colonial mindset in society responsible for the enslavement of nature and the treatment of all other life as mere resources for human exploitation. They called for the stringent enforcement of mechanisms that would hold corporations accountable for crimes against humanity and the development of bodies of law that would recognize the rights of the environment outside of its usefulness to humans. In a similar manner, community psychologists can assist members of the public in obtaining a better grasp of the connection that neoliberalism has with the capitalist promotion of nihilism, the culpability of multinational corporations, the commodification of resources, and the resulting depredation and exploitation of the environment (Kovel 2002). CP advocates can help more people realize that neoliberal philosophy normalizes rapacious pursuits of capitalist production for profit instead of use, exploitation of labour, excessive oil consumption, natural gas extraction, and deforestation that bring direct harm to the most vulnerable of earth's inhabitants. When more of the public

understands how neoliberalism's promotion of extreme capitalism contributes to the ecological crisis as they recognize its involvement in the implementation of carbon trading, the conversion of freshwater supplies into private commodities, and the deliberate violation of laws on limits for toxic material exposure, the level of critical consciousness in society becomes efficiently raised (Kovel 2002). More members of the community consequently become aware of how the privatization of nature conditions people to learn to care for natural resources as owned property.

Most importantly, advocates from CP must realize and accept that they can only help members of the community recognize neoliberalism in society if they themselves are able to clearly and consistently recognize neoliberalism in all its forms. As a strategy to sustain such recognition of the forms and ills of neoliberalism, community psychologists must strive hard to regularly initiate, promote, and maintain collaborative research that focuses relevant discourse on neoliberalism with other advocates for social justice and members of the community to raise critical consciousness. Once community psychologists have successfully exposed the extensive reach and ill effects of neoliberalism in society and on the natural environment, the next important step in the conscientization of the public according to Freire (1970) is to ensure that its members recognize the need to oppose such a system of domination. To raise the critical consciousness of people, CP advocates could help them understand that neoliberalism needs to be actively opposed and that the conviction to assemble such an opposition is crucial to the eradication of neoliberalism. However, it is important for CP advocates to remember that Freire (1970) was clear to point out that when oppressed people eventually muster the force to oppose their oppressors, many of them only continue to do so only until they become oppressors themselves, and that it is vital for the public to be aware of this admonition in order to prevent people from lapsing into complacency, as well as perpetuating oppression in their own



communities. A useful strategy to keep different stakeholders socially aware is through the implementation of educational and informational initiatives that could be promoted by collaborating with community agencies that provide basic services to people, and then incorporated in the programs that people already participate in from day to day. With this strategy, the provision of salient information about the negative effects of neoliberalism becomes more routine and reinforced in the way of thinking of the “average” person.

However, the social justice advocates’ task of raising the critical consciousness of the public through education, collaborative research, and active engagement should not end with merely exposing to the community the far-reaching adverse effects of neoliberalism and helping people recognize the need for opposing neoliberal policies. As a third step, community psychologists should also be ready to propose different options to the public on how neoliberalism can be addressed by members of the community as part of the task of conscientization (Freire 1970). As long as people remain interested in learning more about how they can make life better for themselves, community psychologists should be able to propose options to them in terms that they can understand. As a potential strategy, CP advocates can introduce to community members the merits of the notion of the public involving the state more with the rejection of neoliberal policies, the regulation of underhanded capitalist practices, and the implementation of strategic measures such as restrictions on transfer pricing, investments in infant industries, import tariffs, incremental subsidies, increased top tax rates, business expense limits, and marginal fiscal deficits (Hickel 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). Also, as part of the educational and collaborative research strategies mentioned, community psychologists can propose to members of the public how they can reap the benefits of viable alternatives in the market such as a greater emphasis in the non-profit sector and community development

corporations, including worker cooperatives, credit unions, and mutual insurance companies (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). They can also propose to the public alternative systems to capitalism, such as Kovel's (2002) ecosocialism – an ideology that merges aspects of socialism, Marxism, ecological politics, and alter-globalization, as well as recognizes the intrinsic rights of nature over consumerism and profits. Through their constant and consistent engagement with members of the community in educational initiatives and collaborative research, CP advocates can influence the public to think differently from the way neoliberalism has conditioned them to think.

But just as important as proposing different alternatives, community psychologists should strategically emphasize to the public that the options to oppose neoliberalism, just like the choices to oppose any other system of domination, can be carried out in different contexts and at multiple levels of society – from all levels of government, large social institutions, community organizations, local neighbourhood associations, grassroots movements, and even on a personal level. Thus, another strategy community psychologists can employ in their efforts to raise critical consciousness is convincing members of the community that that there are many different ways to oppose neoliberalism, and that every means is important and contributory in their own way. This particular strategy encourages members of the community to find their own ways to contribute to a cause within their own strengths and limitations. Community psychologists can help the public realize that unrecognized bottom-up efforts of members of the community are just as important as top-down initiatives implemented by large institutions and government agencies. They can help people appreciate the fact that simultaneous actions of community members at different levels of society can produce complementary and synergistic positive results necessary for sustaining the struggle against neoliberalism.

Lastly, as part of the task of raising critical consciousness in the community and the role of CP in putting into action a social justice agenda, community psychologists should be able to underscore the urgency of their public call to awareness and action. Many scholars and advocates have emphasized that the problems society currently face have already reached their crisis points. From the economic crisis to the ecological crisis to the crisis in the true meaning of democracy (Ayma et al. 2011; Hickel 2012; Kovel 2002; Moane 2011; Swift 2010; Wilkinson & Pickett 2010), the urgency for reflection and action to address these crises cannot be overemphasized, essentially making CP's social justice agenda a critical one. CP advocates should be able to find the balance of strategically conveying this urgency to the public without creating undue and unconstructive panic, and still rouse an unequivocal and emphatic response. This is where the input from collaborators from the community and the strategy of employing collaborative research become exceptionally useful, as the collaborators' inherent knowledge of the specific contexts of their own communities provide crucial information on how to navigate that important step of emphasizing the exigency of the social justice agenda to the rest of the public.

### **Convincing the Community of the Possibility of Change and Creating a Shared Vision**

The second and third tasks involved in executing a critical social justice agenda for CP can be carried out synchronously as they naturally go hand in hand. Once community psychologists have successfully managed to raise critical consciousness in the different communities they have engaged with, they must first ensure that they have both instilled enduring optimism for the possibility of change and inspired the creation of a shared vision among the members of those communities before they even begin to attempt to forge the political will necessary to engender social reform.

A risk that accompanies the conscientization of the public, particularly on the impacts of neoliberalism and other systems of domination, is the development of feelings of hopelessness and helplessness in people that comes with the notion that, as individuals without access to control or resources, they are often powerless to effect change. It becomes not only the task but also the responsibility of community psychologists, after presenting seemingly overwhelming and even potentially discouraging information to the public, to convince the people in these communities of the possibility of progressive change. CP advocates should be able to persuade members of the public that they can be agents of their own transformation and that they can play a role in social and political change (Moane 2011). Whether people will believe that greater equality, equity, and justice are attainable will depend partly on the abilities of advocates to rally a renewed sense of optimism, spark contagious enthusiasm, and instill in the public the belief that change is both desirable and possible (Swift 2010), and partly on the creative input, commitment, and greater involvement of members of the community.

Alongside this task of generating an attitude of alacrity and positivity among the members of these communities, comes the almost concurrent task of inspiring them to create a shared vision for the future that they can all aspire to actualize. A considerable amount of writings on oppression and liberation has emphasized the importance of developing a shared vision to garner success in communities working to promote change (Moane 2011). Social visions around improving the quality of life for everyone usually depend on evidence leading to critical consciousness, which are often necessary to provoke political will (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). With the use of collaborative and participatory approaches as a strategy to produce evidence that will be as real, meaningful, and convincing to community members who are equal partners and collaborators in the research and practice involving social justice issues, community

psychologists can facilitate the creation of a unified vision that is shared by both their allies for social justice from other disciplines and the members of the communities they have worked with in their efforts to oppose neoliberalism and other systems of domination. Valuable aspects to the creation of this shared vision are the opportunity and openness for all members of the community to significantly contribute to its development as well as the capacity of the vision to inspire solidarity and activism in everyone in the community.

In attempts to address the negative impacts of neoliberalism, for example, community psychologists could consider a number of theories that have been explored in previous research studies. These theories could guide them in devising strategies that could prove useful for convincing members of the community of the possibility of change and creating a shared vision in their particular settings. One theory that many community psychologists find practical in their research and practice involving social justice issues is the social movements theory. In their book, *Community Psychology: In Pursuit of Liberation and Well-Being*, Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010) noted the role of social movements in promoting or resisting social change in order to uphold an explicit set of values. They argued that social movements root from a combination of factors such as suffering and deprivation, consciousness-raising, congealing events, and political opportunities, and that in order to prepare for action, advocates engaged in social movements should seriously consider multiple sources of support, congruent interests, communication networks, organizational effectiveness, and resource mobilization. They also emphasized the importance of building efficient community coalitions and mustering political influence in efforts to create social change. As a theory that underscores the benefits of collaboration and coalition-building among community members with a common cause, the social movements theory is relevant to convincing community members of the possibility of change and creating a

shared vision. The social movements theory highlights the necessity for researchers and advocates attaining a better understanding of how change happens at small- and large-scale social movements, from the identification of neoliberal practices in local communities to the opposition of neoliberal policies at a legislative level. Coalition-building with community members with a common cause is one concrete strategy that community psychologists can utilize based on the concepts of the social movements theory.

Another theory that could be useful to community psychologists while performing the second and third tasks of the proposed framework is a theory that was introduced by Olson (1971), the collective action theory. According to Mancur Olson (1971), a single individual barely has influence on an organization's circumstances, but each individual is able to rejoice in every improvement developed by the organization, regardless of whether or not they significantly contributed to the improvement. Nobody is interested in solely bearing the expenses for the improvement, instead everyone is trying to profit from the public good in their own way. Olson (1971) argued, however, if individuals in a group are furnished with the right incentives, they could be convinced to contribute to the provision of a public good. Against neoliberal practices, the incentives can be economic (e.g. increasing employment rates), social (e.g. gaining prestige, giving in to peer pressure), political (e.g. following established sanctions), and even selective (e.g. exhibiting altruism, opposing oppressive practices). Based on his collective action theory, community psychologists can help prevent individuals in their communities from going after only personal benefits if they are given the appropriate incentives to contribute to efforts for the common good. Through collaborative research and community engagement that purposely explores and establishes which appropriate incentives can stimulate individual interest for participating in efforts to obtain common gains, CP advocates would be better able to convince

members of the community of the possibility of change and creating a shared vision through collective action.

A related concept to collective action theory is the Social Identity Model for Collective Action [SIMCA] that was proposed by Zomeran, Postmes, and Spears (2008) based on three meta-analyses they conducted that synthesized 182 effects of perceived injustice, perceived efficacy, and social identity on collective action. They introduced SIMCA as a new and integrative perspective on collective action, which proposes that social identity is central to collective action because it directly motivates collective action, and simultaneously bridges the injustice and efficacy explanations of collective action. In their article, they referred to “social identity” as peoples’ subjective sense of identification with a group. The specific implication of this model for community psychologists’ strategies to oppose neoliberalism and other systems of domination is that, as advocates for social justice, it is important that their research and practice deliberately explores, identifies, and focuses on initiatives that would create a stronger sense of social identity in community members, which would in turn relate to a stronger motivation to engage in collective action. In the process, CP advocates can help transform the content of community members’ social identities into more politicized identities against specific systems of domination. Zomeran, Postmes, and Spears (2008) emphasized the importance of social identity transformation and politicization in implemented strategies in order to render more focused, agentic, and committed activist identities in the community.

### **Forging Political Will from a Shared Vision**

Completing the first three tasks of the framework for promoting a social justice agenda does not necessarily guarantee that forging a vigorous political will from a shared vision of a community will be an easy task to accomplish. However, community psychologists should

remember that once the first three tasks have been accomplished, one strategy they could implement is to facilitate the forging of political will at different levels and areas of society, which would provide members of the community multiple options to move forward with the social justice agenda. Working together, CP advocates could encourage community members to express their political will as electoral constituents, at social institutions, in community organizations, through neighbourhood grassroots movements, and even as engaged individual citizens, against neoliberal influences and other systems of domination. Some CP advocates have conducted research that has decidedly influenced public policy and provincial legislation concerning social justice issues (Pomeroy, Trainor, & Pape 2002; Sylvestre et al. 2007), and this is an option that other advocates and community members could pursue.

An additional and related strategy, specifically for new CP researchers and community stakeholders, is to look into the previous efforts exerted by trailblazing community psychologists so that they could learn from the theories and approaches that their predecessors have successfully used to forge political will in the promotion of social justice agendas. Community psychologists have developed participatory studies engaging members of the community that were specifically conducted to address different social justice issues such as patriarchy and sexism, colonialism, weak democracy, and the burgeoning ecological crisis. They have helped members of the community appreciate the bottom-up efforts of everyday people that have brought about positive changes in society, and have presented these grassroots movements as successful examples in their research and community engagement to inspire more citizens to become courageous agents of change. Apart from Moane (2011), other community psychologists have purposefully used feminist theory and approaches to promote social justice and other CP values in their recent work against patriarchy and sexism (Shpungin, Allen, Loomis &



DelloStritto 2012; St. Germaine-Small, Walsh-Bowers, & Mitchell 2012). Several social justice advocates across the globe have utilized CP liberation and indigenous theory, research, and practice to confront the challenges that have resulted from long-standing colonization and colonialism (Cruz & Sonn 2011; Sonn & Quayle 2013). In consonance with the line of thinking and proposals that Swift (2010) put forward in his discourse on strong democracy, several community psychologists have devoted their energies into instilling and fostering democratic ideals, collective participation, civic activism, and political involvement in the community, particularly investing in its youth (Bishop, Vicary, Browne & Guard 2009; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger & Alisat 2007). The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked the period when CP proponents began identifying the problem of climate change and the need for promoting a much needed shift towards a culture of environmental sustainability in their research and practice (Culley & Angelique 2010; Riemer 2010). Community psychologists began seeking out allies among environmentalists, ecological activists, and green scientists to put together ideas, share best practices, build capacities, and implement strategies to oppose neoliberalization in the true spirit of CP participatory action research and collaboration. Together with allies with different expertise, CP advocates have raised awareness, promoted conscientization, and influenced public opinion and conviction on environmental issues for the cultivation of eco-friendly practices and the creation of new laws to protect the environment. By looking back and recognizing the specific theories, approaches, and methods that more seasoned community psychologists have used to forge political will in different social justice areas and issues in their various contexts, fledgling advocates can learn from their forerunners' mistakes, successes, and other valuable experiences.

But apart from having the option to forge political will through research influencing policies and practices at the societal and community levels and valuing lessons learned from previous research endeavours, CP advocates have also had the prerogative to foster political will at a more personal and intimate level. During her discourse on instigating social movements, Moane (2011) encouraged advocates and members of the community to take the opportunity to develop further understanding of their views on political action and change. She emphasized the need to challenge narrow definitions of “political” as something that only involves the apparatus of the state and the electoral process, a notion that has been alienating and disempowering for many oppressed populations. She used of the term “small acts”, which has been used by marginalized women to capture the idea that all people are involved in change and that even small things such as speaking out can be an act that brings about meaningful change in communities. Although some CP proponents would consider the positive results of “small acts” as gains easily expunged by powerful forces determined to maintain societal status quo, “small acts” can represent the promising beginnings of long vocations of steadfast social justice advocates or serve as the impetus for social movements needed to induce progressive change. Because it is not only powerful forces who are motivated to maintain societal status quo, as less privileged people of society also find intense justifications to preserve existing social orders due to inadvertent internalization of inferiority at implicit, non-conscious levels of awareness (Jost & Andrews 2011; Jost, Banaji & Nosek 2004; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon & Ni Sullivan 2003), “small acts” of community members become even more essential catalysts for much-needed change.

Moane (2011) also introduced a system view of change where members of the community could see themselves in empowering roles and as active agents in various contexts, capable of creating currents of change in oppressive systems and forming “niches of resistance”

in their own self-determined spaces. She proposed that a system view that would allow for many acts, both large and small, to be part of ongoing social movements for change is necessary to cultivate solidarity and support in a community, particularly among members of the community who have been persistently oppressed.

Apart from encouraging the public to challenge narrow definitions of “political”, another strategy that social justice advocates could carry out is to encourage members of the community to challenge current popular notions of “democracy” in society. In his primer, *The No-nonsense Guide to Democracy*, Swift (2010) discussed how the definition of “democracy” currently no longer stood for the “rule by the people” principle, and has become a liberal and contemporary version that has less to do with methods of collective decision-making, but more to do with the protection of the individual or corporation from arbitrary interference. He claimed that the present predominant definition of “democracy” has been adjusted to defend the legitimacy of the extraordinary inequality of wealth and privilege in society today. Just as Swift (2010) incited people in the last chapter of his book, CP proponents could encourage community members to take back democracy and transform its definition to a strain of strong democracy that advocates for the radical republican tradition of promoting participatory self-rule of the political community, as well as the equality of power in democratic decision-making. By helping people from the community realize authentic definitions of “political” and “democracy”, community psychologists can inspire and motivate citizens from an already disenfranchised public to find their own ways of expressing civic engagement and political involvement. Members of the community can decide for themselves the level of engagement and particular context they are most comfortable with in order to be able to take part in a larger social movement that is intent on generating transformative societal change. These are crucial strategies for stimulating greater

involvement from the public and inducing activism by increasing a sense of political agency in people, particularly against neoliberal ideology and practices. Once the common notion that “community activism is not considered political and part of a democratic process” is dispelled, community members can begin to experience greater motivation to engage in social movements and become part of a participatory democracy (Swift 2010), especially if they received critical education and had available role models to emulate. Emboldened citizens can choose to participate in a democratic process or even rouse further community involvement personally, locally, provincially, federally, and beyond the nation-state.

History has corroborated the primacy of political will. In the face of multiple crises necessitating a social justice agenda, the role of politics is evident and the maximum participation of a socially aware, critically conscious, and enlivened public is vital. A social movement for greater equality and equity requires a sustained direction, a shared vision for a better society, and a political will to attain much needed economic and social changes, and community psychologists advocating for social justice can make a difference.

### **Acknowledging Community Psychologists’ Challenges in the Promotion of Social Justice**

Although the idea of proposing a social justice agenda for community psychologists to uphold seems a noteworthy intention, it would be remiss to present such an agenda without acknowledging the fact that there would certainly be major challenges to its future implementation that could prevent the four tasks of the proposed framework described in this paper from being carried out successfully. Looking back at North American history as much as seven decades past, CP has encountered challenges that come with being a sub-discipline of mainstream Psychology.

From its inception, the societal legitimacy of the study of mainstream Psychology itself, both as a discipline and as a profession, hinged on developing bodies of plausible knowledge that were readily useful for social applications (Walsh, Teo, & Baydala 2014). In their book, *A Critical History and Philosophy of Psychology: Diversity of Context, Thought, and Practice*, Walsh, Teo, and Baydala (2014) asserted that, in order to overcome the challenge of securing societal legitimacy after World War II, psychologists established themselves as expert specialists of centuries-old psychological ideas that were marketable for clinical and mental health, business, industry, and government. Psychologists' claims to natural-science credentials functioned as persuasive rhetoric in their campaign to secure prominent societal roles as they formed alliances with influential members of society to help contain "irrational" elements such as labour unions and socialists. Society associated psychologists with scientifically sound advice on social behaviour, while psychologists established goals that mirrored society's aims of adaptation to the environment, social control, and management of public behaviour. Although some psychologists engaged in social reform activities and research, many more promoted social remedies to strengthen capitalism and maintain the societal status quo, consequently producing a disciplinary fragmentation in mainstream Psychology (Walsh et al. 2014).

In order to establish their own societal legitimacy in the late 1960s to early 1970s, many community psychologists were also convinced that maintaining the societal status quo through their work was the answer to the challenge of obtaining and sustaining both academic recognition and public approval (Walsh et al. 2014). Keen to maintain their societal utility, a good number of community psychologists tailored their research and practice to society's economic expansion and progress. Some CP advocates sought to empower marginalized and impoverished people by creating projects that helped people find their own solutions to their

problems but at the same time provided opportunities for the government to retreat from its role in solving social problems (Walsh et al. 2014). Like applied and professional psychologists, many community psychologists adopted values of mastery, control, and power. Certain CP programs and academic community psychologists aligned themselves with contemporary public interests and formed identities of expertise around these concerns to maintain societal legitimacy. In fact, some CP programs and academics joined the political agendas of professional psychologists that were mostly congruent with the maintenance of social order and in alliance with the maintenance of societal status quo (Walsh et al. 2014).

On the other hand, despite seemingly insurmountable pressures, some community psychologists consciously made the effort through the years to take small but significant steps to promote social reform for the improvement of community well-being. A somewhat nebulous but nevertheless commendable social justice vision in CP primarily concerned with closing the gap between the current state of affairs and an idealized set of societal conditions (Evans, Rosen, & Nelson 2013) prompted certain community psychologists to conduct collaborative, community-based, participatory research studies to foster equality, equity, and diversity, as well as advocate for marginalized groups. In academic institutions, some community psychologists slowly but patiently worked on eliminating biases against theory, research, and practice that use human-science psychology perspectives, qualitative research methodologies, and community-based participatory approaches that have been often disregarded by positivist scholars (Fisher & Ball 2003; Maton, Perkins, & Saegert 2006). By defending different standards of research rigour, endorsing the pragmatics and applications of value-laden, critically reflexive, and collaborative work, and even introducing practical ideas for educating subsequent generations of psychologists in the promotion of social justice and other CP values (Ali, Liu, Mahmood, & Arguello 2008),

many community psychologists laid the foundation for a future in their area that can incorporate research, methods, analyses, and recommendations more consistent with CP goals and values.

Beyond instigating social reform at the community level and necessary changes at the academic institution level, some noteworthy CP work has been done to directly influence social policy and provincial legislation, explicitly to address certain social justice issues at a greater macrosocial scale (Pomeroy, Trainor, & Pape 2002; Sylvestre et al. 2007). The research efforts of community psychologist Ed Pomeroy and his colleagues from the Office of the Canadian Mental Health Association that developed a “Framework for Support” for people with serious mental illness is one such example. In 2001, these efforts earned them the Canadian Psychology Association Award for Distinguished Contributions to Community Service particularly due to the influence of their work on the creation of the vision for the mental health planning of the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (Nelson & Lavoie 2010). Another example of efforts influencing social policy is the research work of community psychologists Marie-Helene Gagne and Claire Malo that was instrumental in the addition of the concept of “psychological violence” to the Quebec legislation on child maltreatment, and in the training of workers in child protection agencies across the province of Quebec (Nelson, Lavoie, & Mitchell 2007).

The history of CP itself shows that even with the challenges it has faced and continues to face, a good number of its proponents has not lost sight of CP objectives, but instead has continued to persevere in pursuing the promotion of CP core values in their work at multiple levels of society, whether at the grassroots level and local community, at the higher institution level, or the legislative level influencing public policy.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, community psychologists face additional challenges. Although CP is a recognized branch of mainstream Psychology, it is not an established specialized profession.

This means that apart from the limited available academic positions in university CP programs, there are no distinct employment opportunities that would specifically seek out and recruit community psychologists. This also means that in order for community psychologists to practice the shift of perspective that focuses on the community instead of the individual to promote social justice and other CP core values, they would have to find employment or careers that would provide them with, or at least allow them to create, opportunities to do so.

Apart from the few and far between career opportunities in university CP academic programs, there are not that many employment options that would necessarily require the specific qualifications, background, methods, aspirations, and values of community psychologists. This represents a sore lack of opportunities for community psychologists in the employment sector and in the community itself to make use of the collaborative, community-based, participatory approaches they apply when engaging with members of the public, and more precisely, an obvious paucity of opportunities to promote social justice and the other CP values they espouse. Community psychologists would have to actively seek out or creatively develop opportunities in communities they plan to engage with in order to persevere in upholding the social justice agenda. This is only one of the challenges that community psychologists need to overcome in order to be able to advocate for social justice and stay true to the core values they have chosen to espouse.

Ironically, even for those who aspire and are fortunate enough to become academic community psychologists, garnering affiliations with respectable institutions of higher learning, different challenges to promoting social justice still arise. As earlier discussed, certain historically-rooted factors in academe that have been present for decades, such as psychologists' intense desires for societal legitimacy, professional recognition, and peer acceptance, routinely



get in the way of valiant attempts at disrupting the economic and political status quo in society (Walsh et al. 2014). In the past, many academic community psychologists have expressed their desires to promote social justice but unfortunately have tended to use the language of social justice loosely or remained content with providing rhetoric associated with pretensions of enacting radical change in communities (Walsh & Gokani 2014).

In their article discussing academic psychologists' desires for social justice, Walsh and Gokani (2014) expressed the notion that the privileged socio-economic status of academic psychologists has frequently compromised their aspirations to contribute to social actions that challenge societal status quo. They proposed that instead of pursuing the promotion of social justice as psychologists, advocates for social justice in the field of Psychology can choose to join other people in the community in their struggles to fight against injustices as engaged citizens. This is a valid recommendation that would be appropriate for both academic community psychologists striving to overcome socio-economic and intellectual hierarchical systems, as well as CP advocates outside of academe attempting to develop progressive changes within the scope of their chosen careers, to seriously consider.

Whether promoting equality and equity as academic community psychologists, CP proponents in the public sector practicing collaborative, community-based, participatory research and action, or actively involved citizens of society, it is important for all advocates to remember that civic engagement is the key element to carrying out the four described tasks for upholding the social justice agenda proposed in this paper. Through civic engagement, increased participation from members of the community and subsequent respectful collaboration can be elicited and developed to help open doors and create opportunities for advocates in the promotion of the social justice agenda.

### **Critical Reflections on Upholding a Social Justice Agenda**

Every individual who has made a conscious decision to promote greater equality and equity in society should critically reflect on the kind and amount of personal investment they want to commit to upholding a social justice agenda against oppressive systems of domination. As a neoteric community psychologist, my own critical reflections have motivated me to evaluate my current position as a scholar, researcher, and social justice advocate in terms of my limitations and privileges. In this evaluation, I have decided to look back and recognize my own conscientization and the evolution of my own critical consciousness.

Prior to obtaining my CP graduate education, I had little knowledge of CP concepts and approaches, and had minimal community involvement. My understanding of social issues and problems was confined to the limited information I gathered from newspapers, the Internet, and television news broadcasts. After learning CP principles, values, conceptual tools, and research work from my doctoral training, I became more socially aware and critically conscious of the injustices present in society that have resulted from the effects of systems of domination and a weak democracy. More importantly, my CP research work in advocating for support for marginalized sexual and gender minority youth in the publicly-funded schools in my region, and the resulting collaborative experiences I gained with various stakeholders from the community in the last several years, have provided me with the privileges of helping raise public critical consciousness, supporting community aspirations for change in society, and bolstering political convictions for transformative social movements.

Prompted by my growing desire to promote CP values, my developing civic engagement has led to my passionate involvement in the grassroots movement for the successful establishment of the first community centre in my region dedicated to addressing the social needs

and wellness of its lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender population. Just by appreciating the positive outcomes resulting from my own conscientization and experiences of sharing with an engaged community a staunch belief in the possibility of change, a vision for greater inclusion and equity in society, and a political will to engender these changes, it is easy for me to recognize the benefits of promoting a social justice agenda that could provide the same positive experiences to others.

Apart from gradually learning to recognize the limitations that come with engaging with communities as an academic researcher, as well as the privileges of my higher education and training, my critical reflections have also led me to acknowledge the responsibilities that come with personal conscientization and the need for maintaining an appropriate level of critical consciousness in the future moving forward. For without purposefully sustaining one's own critical consciousness, the ability to assist others in gaining it would be constrained by a self-imposed limitation. As the integral first task for community psychologists to accomplish in the promotion a social justice agenda, it is necessary to value the importance of raising everyone's critical consciousness of the pervasive injustices enduring in society. For when the critical consciousness of the public is auspiciously raised, then the subsequent tasks that lead to the forging of a political will for generating much needed changes can take place. It is imperative, therefore, that not only do I need to remain vigilant for opportunities to maintain my own critical consciousness and stimulate the conscientization of others, but also remain conscientious in recognizing ways to develop similar opportunities. Together with other critically conscious members of the community, we can continue in solidarity to identify the important issues that our community needs to address, share a vision to improve the circumstances in our lives, and forge the political will to generate the changes for a better future and more just society.

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