
Critical psychology in the belly of the beast

notes from North America¹

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C*ritical perspectives on and within psychology have only recently fused into a somewhat coherent framework in North America. This article reviews developments leading to the emergence of this framework and gives an account of the obstacles faced by critical psychologists working in Canada and the United States, where the technocratic and scientific forms of psychology are nearly hegemonic. The authors reflect on the possibilities for a fortified critical movement and offer suggestions on strategy.*

Keywords: critical psychology (history), critical theory, psychology

The United States and Canada have spawned at least five thousand universities, all of which offer some form of education in scientific psychology. This means that most students are exposed to the objectifying and individualising perspectives inherent in the discipline's primary stance toward human action and experience. Over half a million individuals in these two countries have been trained to perform some sort of psychologically-informed practice such as

assessment, testing, counselling, program evaluation, training, personnel selection, coaching, and so forth in either institutional settings or in private practice. To the extent that the associated theories, research methods, and intervention practices have been recognised by a few psychologists as exploitative, colonising, individualistic and/or objectifying, there has always been a reaction one could call critical psychology in North America. In general, this impulse has been based on humanistic concerns, on the idea that human beings, in respect for their 'freedom,' 'consciousness,' and 'dignity,' should not be subjected to practices appropriate for the control and manipulation of physical matter or animals. This might be seen as the core impulse of North American critical psychology from the outset, and it is based in part on a carryover from Judeo-Christian concepts of human nature into secular social science. The fundamental argument is one about the proper relation between *techne* and *psyche*.

The term critical psychology, however, currently connotes a set of political concerns that were not highly developed in the humanistic psychologies of the 1960s and 1970s. Humanistic approaches in North America were developed to counter the determinism of psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Through most of the twentieth century, the few North American psychologists who held progressive, Marxist, socialist, or otherwise leftist views, applied these to their field and found it seriously lacking. It is important to note that a great number of the early progressive social psychologists were in some way inspired by European socialist and communist movements. Some of them came directly from Europe escaping fascism; others grew up in areas such as the Midwestern areas of Canada and the United States where many Scandinavian farmers nurtured socialist ideas in the early twentieth century. Important differences seem to exist between the politically-motivated social psychologists of the 1950s and 1960s and those of the 1980s and 1990s. The earlier social psychologists used scientific methods to study conformity, authoritarianism, and prejudice, among other social psychological dynamics related to power imbalances. Those who came later started from the

assumption that the discipline of psychology itself was part of the problem and therefore worked to expose its ideological function in maintaining capitalist hegemony by fostering individualism.

For the purposes of this article, we discuss primarily the activities explicitly termed 'critical psychology' that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in North America as a synthesis or conglomeration of several critical trends within academic psychology. We conceptualise critical psychology as a strategy aimed at politicising all subdisciplines in psychology. It can be understood as a metadiscipline that urges the discipline of psychology to critically evaluate its moral and political implications, as these relate specifically to human well-being (Prilleltensky, 1994). Critical psychology focuses on transforming the discipline of psychology in order to promote emancipation in society. In this article, we will not discuss the work of many psychologists who have applied mainstream psychological concepts and practices in their well-intentioned work for peace and social justice, since those forms of work are quite different in spirit from what we know here as critical psychology. In this article, we draw on personal and academic experience as well as on the results of a formative evaluation of critical psychology conducted by the second co-author in 1999 with the support and guidance of her mentor, Isaac Prilleltensky.

However, even as we start to tell this story, we are already finding ourselves at its limit. For this form of critical psychology has enjoyed a marginal popularity in North America, and even now it is questionable who will carry its banner forward, and continue to understand themselves as critical psychologists dedicated to such a project. North American critical psychology is like a signifier lying at a crossroads waiting for someone to pick it up, and continue moving it in one direction or another. Here we hope to recount some of the history that has brought North American critical psychology to where it is today, and then address some of the challenges it faces in moving forward.

Historically, direct exchanges between forms of critical psychology in different parts of the world have mostly occurred only at the individual level. This has been crucial to the emer-

gence of critical psychology in North America. For example, editors of the first textbook of critical psychology, Fox and Prilleltensky (1997), met in the early 1990s, and started the Radical Psychology Network. Later, the collaboration between Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) developed at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada where both were teaching. These authors have focused on making critical psychology concepts accessible to students and have worked to translate concepts and critiques into ideas for practical action in various settings. The edited book by Fox and Prilleltensky (1997) is a collection of essays written by well-known critical psychology scholars, many of whom are located in North America. It is composed of a first section called 'critical overviews' which includes a chapter on values and assumptions in psychology, the political dimensions of the history of psychology, methodological issues and qualitative research, ethical considerations, and understanding and practicing critical psychology. The section called 'critical arenas' presents the case for critical psychology in a variety of psychological subdisciplines: clinical, developmental, social, community, gay and lesbian, cross cultural, political as well as the study of personality, intelligence and the law in psychology. The third section presents "critical theories" highlighting feminist and discursive psychologies, critical theory, postmodernism and hermeneutics. The final section provides some critical reflections on where critical psychology has been and where it is going in North America especially. The more recent book by Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) was also written for people who are relatively new to critical psychology. The authors wanted to write a book that would provide readers with practical suggestions for how critical psychology can be applied in a range of different settings. The first section of the book presents the foundational concepts of critical psychology. The second is an exploration of the ways in which psychologists could be trained more critically as educators, researchers and in their applied work. In the third section of the book, the authors present the case of how to practice critical psychology as clinical, counselling, school, health and community

psychologists. The final section presents suggestions for building capacity in critical psychology in diverse settings.

As another example of the leadership of certain key individuals who have helped to promote critical psychology in North America, Sloan, who was trained in personality theory at the University of Michigan, traveled from the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma to Paris and Berlin in 1983 to conduct interviews with Marxist theorists of personality and subjectivity. He met and formally interviewed Lucien Sève, author of *Marxisme et la théorie de la personnalité* (1969). For the interview, see Sloan (1987). In Paris, Sloan also attended seminars with socialist psychoanalyst Gérard Mendel and conversed at length with Slavoj Žižek, who had just finished a doctorate in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In Berlin, Sloan met with Klaus Holzkamp and offered to help arrange translation for his major book, *Grundlegung der Psychologie*. Due to the length and complexity of the book, as well as the small market for it in North America, this task was never completed. However, Charles Tolman of Victoria University, in Victoria, Canada, worked extensively in Berlin with Holzkamp and other critical psychologists and later served as the primary interpreter in English of the Berlin school of *Kritische Psychologie* (cf. Tolman, 1994). Thomas Teo, a critical psychologist who received training in Germany and later became a faculty member at York University in Toronto, Canada, also published research in English on the contributions of Klaus Holzkamp and German critical psychology (Teo, 1998).

The Internet made dialogue and exchange possible among critical psychologists, through the Radical Psychology Network and the Critical Psychology Network email lists, for example. It was by Internet listservs that the calls for papers were distributed for both the *Critical Psychology: Voices for Change* book project (Sloan, 2000), and the first North American conference on critical psychology in Monterey, California in 2001. A major accomplishment of the Monterey conference was a *Manifesto for Critical Community Psychology*, which argued for a return to the original goal of community psychology – system transformation – and

specified needed changes in training programs, especially for improved theoretical and interdisciplinary training. Electronic networks were also used in the recruitment of participants for the formative evaluation of the field of critical psychology worldwide undertaken by Austin and Prilleltensky (Austin and Prilleltensky, 2001a, b; Prilleltensky and Austin, 2001).

Some North American critical psychologists have been influenced by Latin American liberation theology and psychology. Brinton Lykes's extensive work on gender and culture among Mayan women in Guatemala, for example, has been clearly informed by her reading, research and participatory engagement with the concepts and practices of liberation psychology (Lykes, 2001). Generally, this influence comes through graduate schools of education where Paulo Freire is studied as a form of critical pedagogy. Latin American community-social psychology has also had an impact through the community psychology divisions of the American Psychological Association and the Canadian Psychological Association. And, many psychologists participating in Latin American political solidarity work have been inspired by the work and the example of the social psychologist and Jesuit priest Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), who was assassinated by Salvadoran troops in 1989. An annual conference on the social psychology of liberation has been held in Latin American cities since 1997 and the hundreds of students who attend clearly plan to integrate issues of human rights and social justice into their psychology work.

From our point of view, critical psychology exists in the United States and Canada primarily because of intellectual currents from Europe, Latin America, Australia, and increasingly South Africa. North American critical psychology is dependent on the theories of the French poststructuralists, the German critical theorists, British Marxists, and Latin American liberation psychologists. There is no North American Journal of Critical Psychology, and what few publications that are produced by North American scholars on critical topics are often published outside of North America by international presses such as Sage or Routledge. Further, to participate in a steady evolving conversation on

critical topics in psychology it is almost essential one travel to an international critical psychology conference.

While North American critical psychologists have looked abroad for gaining insight into the psychological field, mainstream North American psychology remains astoundingly insular and ignorant about the wider international psychological community. For instance, contemporary text books still make such naïve claims as 'Asian women are most likely to be supertasters' (Nevid, 2005), without any discussion of what exactly defines an 'Asian'. The recent American Psychological Association Five-Year Report made the 'internationalization' of psychology one of psychology's top priorities (APA, 2005). This document paints a world needy for our scientific psychological insights, and does not even entertain any possible imperialist implications behind the dissemination of North America's brand of psychology.

North American critical scholars step in to address such lacunae in their work. Critical historical work that has examined the social and political impacts of psychology as a profession include a recent edited book by Pickren and Dewsbury (2002) with reprinted chapters written by critically minded psychologists in North America. Examples of chapters included in a section dedicated to psychology and the public interest are: 'Unemployment, politics, and the history of organized psychology'; 'Cultural contexts and scientific change in psychology; An asocial psychology and a misdirected clinical psychology'; 'Psychology's problematic relations with psychoanalysis, 1909-1960'; 'Assessing psychology's moral heritage through our neglected utopias'; 'Placing women in the history of psychology: The first American women psychologists'; 'E.G. Boring and antisemitism in American psychology, 1923-1953'; 'Recontextualizing Kenneth B. Clark: An afrocentric perspective on the paradoxical legacy of a model psychologist-activist' (Pickren and Dewsbury, 2002).

The first Critical and Qualitative Approaches to Health Psychology Conference was held in Canada at Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1999. This gathering brought together many critically minded psychologists doing qualitative

research in health settings from across North America and internationally (see Canadian example, Gray, James, Manthorne, Gould and Fitch, 2004). The conference has continued to be held biannually. Researchers who attended this conference have formed an email listserv and a professional organisation called the International Society for Critical Health Psychology.

Critical psychological work from the perspective of indigenous peoples in North America is only beginning to take hold and is still often initiated by white psychologists (Chataway, 1998; in progress; Walsh-Bowers and Johnson, 2002). In North American psychology, we have seen some critical responses to extreme forms of psychological treatment such as electroshock therapy (Weitz, 1986; Capponi, 1992) and overt racism in psychology (Teo, 1999; Bhatia, 2002). However, we are still left with deep concerns about the continuing lack of critical scrutiny students and practitioners have toward psychological concepts, methods, and practices in Canada and the United States.

North American critical psychologists, beginning usually in a depoliticised mode and then drawing on external intellectual sources, have had little direct connection with social or political movements. A notable exception to this is Naomi Weisstein whose involvement in second-wave feminism in the United States extended far beyond academic feminism and academic psychology (Weisstein, 1971). Although Weisstein and others have been trying for decades to lead by example in psychology, change continues to be slow in our discipline. In gatherings at conferences over the past few years, North American critical psychologists have recognised that the time for critique without action is ending. Many critically oriented psychologists in North America are busily hammering out professional roles that move beyond amelioration and adjustment and contribute much more directly to social transformation (see, for example, www.psyact.org). PsyACT is an internet-based coalition that aims to transcend disciplinary boundaries between psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, counsellors, psychologists, and social workers to focus energies on reducing poverty.

However, one of the factors most limiting the impact and growth of critical psychology in North America is its inability to get a foothold in the academy. This seems in contrast to the rest of the world, in which critical psychology is seen as sometimes too insulated in the ivory tower. As one participant in the formative evaluation of critical psychology conducted by the second co-author stated, we 'spend too much time looking at ourselves instead of looking at the people who critical psychologists should be accountable to'. In North America, however, there is very little communication between critical psychologists on any issues, and psychologists interested in social transformation turn out doing the majority of their interactions with community members individually, unable to make systemic change which is only possible with a community of scholars and activists working together. Thus, interestingly, the growing popularity of participatory action research (PAR) in North America (e.g. Fine et al, 2001, Brydon-Miller, 2003) signals the development of links between the academy and the community for social change, but as of yet has not yielded more opportunities to further a critical psychology dialogue in the academy.

It is probably fair to say that much of the North American work that would be called 'critical psychology' in the UK, Australia, and South Africa is conducted in departments of women's studies or cultural studies and only occasionally by people who have professional training in psychology. The constraints and reward systems of academic psychology leave few spaces for qualitative feminist psychoanalytic or poststructuralist action research, for example. This means that much of the critical work is conducted by clinicians outside of academia or by psychologists based in schools of education or other interdisciplinary programs. From what we have seen, mainstream psychologists in North America have paid little attention to the devastating critiques of the discipline that have circulated globally. Even North American feminist psychologists have not made much headway in creating space for a broader range of theoretical and methodological paradigms in their research, but have instead had to set up alternative spaces for

their work. They have started separate journals such as *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, which is still dominated by research conducted using quantitative methods. Following many years of advocacy and agitation, feminist psychologists formed professional associations like the Association for Women and Psychology (AWP) and the Section on Women and Psychology (SWAP) in Canada. And they organised conferences like the Qualitative Research in Psychology Conference held biannually at the City University of New York, and the Gender, Sexuality and Health Conference to be held in June 2004 which was organised by a feminist psychologist working in a Canadian department of Women's Studies.

There are no major research departments dedicated to critical psychology in North America. The slight exceptions are the few departments that house important critical psychology scholars and who thus obtain a critical reputation. The new doctoral program in Community Research and Action at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee is a good example. This program is 'designed to train action-researchers for academic or policy-related careers in applied community studies: i.e., community psychology, community development, prevention, community health / mental health, organisational change, and ethics'. The program is particularly noteworthy for the critical stance taken to community problems, and has been implementing several innovative community interventions inspired by critical psychology models. Also relevant is Duquesne University, a small Catholic liberal arts university in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Duquesne began as an existential phenomenological clinical psychology program in the 1960s. Over the last forty years its mission has grown to incorporate many heterodox approaches to the human sciences including housing internationally recognised scholars in Lacanian psychoanalysis, post-structural research theory, Marxism, and critical psychology generally. There are also smaller independent Psy.D. training programs such as Saybrook Graduate School or the Fielding Graduate Institute, and programs with terminal master's degrees

such as City College of San Francisco, which are training students with critical insights, while still training according to 'mainstream' requirements.

The programs most consistently providing training in critical insight in psychology are those with an emphasis on theoretical and philosophical issues in psychology. For example, a graduate program dedicated to historical and theoretical psychology at York University in Toronto, Canada was formed in the 1960s and a graduate program in history of psychology started at about the same time at the University of New Hampshire in the United States. More recently in the 1990s, the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada developed a theoretical and philosophical psychology graduate program. These institutions are the academic homes of specialised journals such as *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences* edited by Christopher Green at York and *Theory and Psychology* edited by Hank Stam at Calgary, as well as important critical scholars like Kurt Danziger (Danziger, 1990). Professional associations such as Cheiron: Association of the History of the Behavioural Sciences, and the International Society for Theoretical Psychology hold regular conferences in North America as well. Recently, Slife, Reber, and Richardson, all senior members of North American theoretical psychology, co-edited the collection *Critical Thinking about Psychology* (2005) on the American Psychological Association press. This book has become one of APA's 'Best Sellers' and may signal a growing interest in critical psychological reflection.

For an intellectual discipline to grow, it is essential for graduate students entering the field to be trained in the discipline's history and method, and have opportunities to participate in forming its future trajectories. North American critical psychology has been having a difficult time accomplishing this. Since there are already few academics who participate in the critical psychology community, there are few opportunities for graduate students to be mentored and introduced into the field. Graduate students with an interest in critical perspectives have to find ways to connect with professors at great geographical distances, and then must

dedicate their time and energies developing skills which their dissertation committee will probably not approve of, and which will not necessarily assist them during their job search. Further, the professors they turn to must extend their energies to students in the little time that is left them after all of their departmental and 'mainstream' demands have been met. This has resulted in a disparate graduate student critical psychology community in North America. This was demonstrated to Sloan and Warner during the graduate student conference in critical psychology that they organised at Duquesne University in the Spring of 2005. After two years of publicity, the conference was attended by a handful of students, none of whom were affiliated with any of the 'well-known' North American critical psychology scholars. The students who attended had all been pursuing critical psychology on their own, often without any mentors in their department, and thus each came with their own understanding of the agendas, debates, and texts which should organise discussion and action. Most participants considered the conference a positive experience, yet there was not enough common ground to build the discipline forward from this event: instead the dominant question that emerged was, 'what is critical psychology?'. It is hoped that the conversation on critical psychology which has led to the publication of the pieces in this issue of the *International Journal of Critical Psychology* will design a trajectory for future collaborations as these students grow and take on university and public positions. One of the goals of such work is to further ensconce critical psychology in the academy. Without regularly scholarly meetings, or departments which advance its cause, it will be hard for the individual efforts of critical scholars to gain relevance and heft in psychological theory and praxis.

Fragmentation is very difficult to overcome in psychology and still seems to represent an important barrier to a cohesive critical psychological movement in North America. To illustrate this, consider the following: there are actually separate advocacy groups called *Psychoanalysts for Social Responsibility*, *Psychotherapists and Mental Health Practitioners for Social*

Responsibility, Psychologists for Social Responsibility, and Counselors for Social Justice. There is very little, if any, coordination among these groups. Then there are the more academic groups such as the Society for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the Society for Community Research and Action, the Section on Community Psychology, and so forth.

Whether or not it will be possible to organise these various groups into intellectual and political initiatives under the banner of 'critical psychology' is very much an open question. The human sciences are a large and diverse field which can draw our attentions and activities in any one of several directions. Meanwhile, with the United States steering further and further to the political right, many active critical psychologists wonder if their energies might not be better spent working for political change generally, instead of trying to enlighten and mobilise colleagues who often do not seem interested. To understand North American critical psychology, it is important to understand the crisis of progressive political commitment which has generally befallen North America, and especially the United States, since the end of the Cold War. There is a general smugness which drapes everything, a certainty of 'our' superiority, and a hostility to those who call for any kind of self-examination. To be a critical psychologist will be unpopular, and organising scholars towards an identity that will make them unpopular is difficult, especially when as of yet, there is little consensus among critical psychologists in North America about what we offer in return. As noted earlier, psychology as a discipline sees itself as left leaning, socially active, and just. Most psychologists believe they are doing good within the necessary constraints of the discipline (e.g. positivistic research design, a focus on the individual, and a bias towards quantification and the scientific writing method). As of yet, the signifier 'critical psychology' has not mustered the force to break such complacency, nor offered many plausible alternatives linked to ways of making a living. Further, many emerging students who may be interested in critical perspectives on the mainstream feel alienated by the almost vulgar Marxist persuasion of the earlier

generation. Many feel the focus on structure over individuals obliterates the discipline of psychology generally, and as one student said about the discipline, 'If I have to believe in Marx, I just don't think it's going to work out'. Students who participated in Duquesne University's critical psychology conference find themselves drawn to a more generally radical form of research and praxis, and aesthetic rebellion against the mainstream as much as a class one. Some students have even taken to arguing that critical psychology is 'too focused on issues of power' and should be broadened to talk about methodology and epistemology critique within the bounds of normal science. Such arguments by the 'next generation' signal that North American critical psychology is a signifier still in a process of becoming. Where this signifier will slide next will be determined by those who step up to do the hard work of concretising the project sketched out in the critiques that have constituted critical psychology to this point.

Strategies that might increase the ability of North American critical psychologists to reach their goals have been emerging in recent years. First, we see improved collaboration between advocacy groups, especially between Psychologists for Social Responsibility and Counselors for Social Justice. A conference series was launched at Lewis and Clark College in 2005, with follow-up conferences in the planning stages, and the electronic Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology began in 2007. These events have set up possibilities for dialogue between critical psychologists and counselor/psychologist activists. Such connections will need to occur even more broadly to link critical psychologists to change agents within the larger social movements (ecology, feminism, human rights, global economic justice, anti-racism, etc.). Theoretical/practical work will need to focus on resistance to change, ideological stuckness, and examinations of alternatives. For example, as critical psychologists form alliances with consumer/survivors of the 'mental health' system and work with them for reform and respect of their human rights, complicated ethical and political issues arise: Can psychodiagnosis be jettisoned entirely? Is there a right to suicide? What roles are left for mental health professionals? Critical

psychologists can work with the movement to develop helpful frameworks for answering these questions.

Second, better links between theoretical work and practical projects are being developed by those who are in academic positions and have training responsibilities (although largely through connections to community psychology, so far). Students who previously could have complained that critical psychology only points out the flaws in mainstream psychology and offers no alternative now have access to several training sites where, for example, students got involved in social justice aspects of relief work for Hurricane Katrina victims in New Orleans, or where ongoing collaboration with programs working out alternatives to the biomedical mental health system for adolescents.

Finally, North American critical psychology can learn an important lesson from the greater success of its peers around the world. European educational models clearly take ideas and theory more seriously. Our colleagues in the global South take both ideas and radical praxis very seriously. North American higher education in psychology has suffered greatly from a phobia of social theory and philosophy in general. Graduate students are required to devote extraordinary attention to advanced statistical procedures and related research methodologies while being left totally clueless about issues in the philosophy of social science, ethics, politics, etc.. Perhaps worse, they are rarely encouraged to master even the basics of sociology, anthropology, communications, and history. Thousands of PhDs in psychology and related professions are thus granted each year to individuals who are merely technicians with no idea of how their specialty connects to anything beyond the people to whom their 'science' is to be applied. North American critical psychologists of the next generation have a giant task to assume within the belly of the beast: to advance the critical theory of psychological practice (the entire psy-complex) to the point that each dehumanising mode of psychosocial intervention in people's lives is problematised and eventually abandoned, while allying with those who offer promising alternatives for the reduction of suffering through social transformation.

Notes

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