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## TROUBLING HISTORY AND DIVERSITY: DISCIPLINARY DECADENCE IN COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

Nick Malherbe\* and Sipho Dlamini\*\*

*According to Lewis Gordon, one is said to adhere to disciplinary decadence when disciplinary orthodoxy is prioritised over how particular problems are addressed. Under neoliberal capitalism, disciplinary decadence oftentimes reproduces a politics that is based on individual – rather than collective – freedoms (i.e. a liberal politics). This article interrogates two common disciplinarily decadent ways of politicising community psychology (CP), namely: parochial historicization and respect for diversity as liberal tolerance. We argue that in both cases, pseudo-progressive language is used to advance a liberal politics that distorts the collective change-making capacities of CP. In an attempt to break from such liberal politics, we consider how an ethic of discomfort can allow community psychologists to move beyond disciplinary decadence. This ethic, we contend, can be advanced through pedagogy (i.e. unlearning disciplinary comforts) and solidarity-making (i.e. embracing, rather hurriedly resolving, conflict when forming political alliances). We conclude by calling for a CP that signifies a critical approach rather than a set of disciplinarily-bound dictums.*

**Keywords:** tolerance, historiography, justice, diversity, curriculum, disciplinary decadence, discomfort

### 1. Introduction

Mainstream psychology rarely assumes a progressive politics, let alone openly declares its political orientation (Burton et al., 2012). However, with social justice included as a value and an aim in the vision of the Society for Community Research and Action, Division 27 of the American Psychological Association, community psychology (CP) represents one of the only formalised psychological disciplines concerned with social justice. We maintain that because psychosocial justice lies at its core, CP is urged to declare an overtly ‘political content and awareness’ (Seedat et al., 1988, p. 48) that produces ‘politically relevant psychological knowledge’ (Walsh & Gokani, 2014, p. 41). Such a politics has been assumed within CP in numerous ways, such as through the liberation psychology orientation (e.g. Moane, 2003); Marxist approaches (e.g. Hamber et al., 2001); decolonial feminisms (e.g. Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019); the critical psychology paradigm (Kagan et al., 2011); and analyses that focus on power and conflict (e.g. Pretorius-Heuchert & Ahmed, 2001).

Within mainstream variations of CP, however, an unspoken liberal politics tends to operate through a pseudo-progressive language which adheres to social change as rhetoric rather than enactment (Gokani & Walsh, 2017; Trickett, 2015). Here, we follow Williams’ (1988) understanding of liberalism as a doctrine based on individualist theories of society. A liberal

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politics claims that freedom is best realised under socio-political conditions which are favourable to individual – rather than collective – progress (e.g. the so-called free market). Although liberalism has allowed for the mainstreaming of a number of civil liberties, liberal politics remain tethered to modes of accumulation and possession that map onto oppressive neoliberal ideology (see Brown, 2006). In this sense, a liberal CP will always be more concerned with liberty and individualism than it is with equality and collectively (Prilleltensky, 2008; Wark, 2017).

Burton and his colleagues (2012) argue that, today, most mainstream conceptions of CP have embraced a liberal-philanthropic political paradigm that conforms to a distributive conception of justice. Examples here include mainstream CP's regular alignment with nongovernmental organizations which function in the interests of global capital; its embrace of a corporatised model of community engagement (Fourie & Terre Blanche, 2019); and its increasing reliance on participatory methods which can work to relegate democratic ideals to capitalist logic (Coimbra et al., 2012). The de-radicalizing potential of CP is also observed in the role that the discipline has played in defusing social movements while proclaiming to mobilize them through a pseudo-progressive language (Parker, 2015; Walsh & Gokani, 2014). Coimbra and his colleagues (2012) provide several examples here, including community psychologists' role in diminishing grassroots resistance in Palestine and Britain. Globally, all of this has affected the legitimacy and even the perceived credibility of CP (Carolissen, 2006).

Situated in the tradition of critical community psychology (e.g. Burton et al., 2012; Fryer, 2008; Kagan et al., 2011; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Seedat et al., 1988; Walsh & Gokani, 2014), as well as writing from and working in South Africa, we attempt in this article to imagine CP within an emancipatory politics. Such a politics, we argue, rejects the liberal constitution of much mainstream CP, and is oriented toward systemic, socially just change. A progressive politics of this kind, we contend, does not comprise a single political standpoint, nor does it negate the important community-engaged work that many liberal, well-funded iterations of CP have undertaken (Fourie & Terre Blanche, 2019). Instead, we argue that because liberal politics reflect a capitalistic common sense, such a politics is necessarily limited in its change-making capacities. A politically progressive critical CP, on the other hand, could allow us to draw on CP's institutional resources (e.g. project funding, venues, access to mental health services, and transport) in a manner that harnesses community-led political action beyond liberal parameters.

## **2. Disciplinarily decadent modes of politicizing community psychology**

In this section, we argue that a liberal politics is oftentimes reproduced within CP through the discipline's adherence to disciplinary decadence. The Africana philosopher Lewis Gordon (Gordon, 2014, p. 86) describes disciplinary decadence as:

*“the phenomenon of turning away from living thought, which engages reality and recognises its own limitations, to a deontologised or absolute conception of disciplinary life. The discipline becomes, in solipsistic fashion, the world. And in that world, the main concern is the proper administering of its rules, regulations, or, as Fanon [1967] argued, (self-devouring) methods”.*

In other words, disciplinary decadence occurs when a discipline's identity becomes defined by its adherence to particular methodological orthodoxies, rather than how it appreciates problems as they exist in reality. A devotion to disciplinary decadence can result in prioritizing particular frameworks, rules and theoretical explanations over the liberatory requirements of the moment. In



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this way, legitimate knowledge is confined to a narrow understanding of the discipline. A ‘disciplinary reality’ of sorts is thus established, wherein the world is understood through a discipline’s accepted modes of knowledge-making (see Gordon, 2017). It should be clear that disciplines are not reprehensible in and of themselves. Certainly, disciplines are crucial in critiquing, affirming, reforming, deconstructing, building upon and developing knowledges, actions, and theories through a common frame of reference. Rather, it is when disciplines ascribe to decadence that they become rigid tools that can be readily picked up by the liberal establishment.

Awareness of CP’s disciplinary decadent potential calls for critical community psychologists to remain cognizant of how their discipline can be made complicit with a liberal status quo, as well as how it can resist this (see Pretorius-Heuchert & Ahmed, 2001; Ratele et al., 2018). Indeed, although CP is often considered a sub-discipline of psychology, it can also be understood as a fluid and contextually-sensitive set of critical assumptions and values that surround community research and practice (see Fryer, 2008; Lau, 2017).

Gordon (2016, p. 1-2) argues that a crisis in knowledge, such as one caused by adherence to disciplinary decadence, results in three ‘retreats’:

*‘The first is toward a form of naturalism that subordinates thinking to the natural sciences. The second is a retreat into historicism, in which there is believed to be the possibility of emerging rigorous because of an ultimate appeal to “facts,” albeit often of the textual form of an archive or a documented event. When those two fail, the last retreat seems to be language itself until amnesia sets in and the process of searching for objectivity begins anew and the process recurs.’*

Taking leave from the second of these retreats within the crisis of knowledge-production (see Graham, 2017), we posit that parochial historiographies and respect for diversity as liberal tolerance signify two commonplace disciplinarily decadent strategies of politicizing CP within liberal parameters. We argue that both of these strategies obscure the role that CP is, and is not, able to play in politically progressive community activity.

## **2.1 Parochial historicization**

From many of the mainstream historiographies of United Statesian CP, it is possible to conclude that contemporary enactments of CP have strayed from their politically progressive foundational principles. In this regard, some have called for CP in the US to return to the progressive origins from which it emerged at the 1965 Boston Conference on the *Education of Psychologists for Community Mental Health*; the so-called Swampscott Conference. This foundational iteration of CP in the US, so the argument goes, took inspiration from pertinent social issues of the day (Wolff & Swift, 2008), with the notions of civil rights and distributive justice having been especially influential in considering how CP might conceptualize systems-level change in the US and beyond (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Toro, 2005). Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) note that the politicized sociocultural moment from which CP emerged in the US (e.g. the Civil Rights Movement; the War on Poverty; Second Wave Feminism; and opposition to the Vietnam War) shaped the way by which community psychologists all over the world envisioned a progressive alternative to mainstream psychology. Thus, in repeatedly acknowledging the progressive politics that inspired CP at its origin point in the US (Toro, 2005), contemporary enactments of CP, it would seem, are challenged to once again take up these progressive politics.



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Calls for CP to return to its supposed progressive foundational moment in the US have, however, been challenged. Although Swampscott sought to develop a CP in the US that rejected the asocial and ahistorical elements of American culture, it may have inadvertently reproduced some of these cultural currents (Trickett, 2015). Attention has been drawn to the fact that almost every attendee at the Swampscott Conference was a white male from a clinical psychology background (Tebes, 2016). Although the views of conference attendees tended to depart from the kinds of individualism which plague mainstream psychology (Kloos et al., 2012), issues of coloniality, capitalism and patriarchy were virtually absent from the conference proceedings (Gokani & Walsh, 2017). Indeed, those attending the Swampscott Conference appeared to prioritize the reification of CP's disciplinary legitimacy over the kinds of social movements which they claimed had inspired them (see Gokani & Walsh, 2017; Seedat et al., 1988). Swampscott seemed to leave the activist role of community psychologists as an 'open question' (Langhout, 2016), with a more explicit political commitment only articulated later (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). Thus, claiming inspiration from, rather than seeking to foster links with, social movements of the day meant that Swampscott, in large part, politicized CP in the US along liberal institutional requirements (Kloos et al., 2012; Prilleltensky, 1999).

The point to be made, then, is that, as Fryer (2008) demonstrates, offering the story of CP in the US as the singular origin story of CP globally is not only inaccurate – indeed, CP has 'multiple histories' (Stevens, 2007, p. 29) – but also acts to control the politics of CP, obscuring what these can be and, importantly, what they cannot or should not be. As a number of critical community psychologists have differently recognised (e.g. Fryer, 2008; Gokani & Walsh, 2017), a profound kind of disciplinary decadence is on display here, wherein CP is encouraged to look only to one institutionalised, United Statesian iteration of itself when formulating its politics. Such disciplinarily decadent historiography constrains our collective imaginings of CP's political capacities in the US and elsewhere, all while erasing various internationalist enactments of CP, many of which were politically progressive (see Stevens, 2007).

Davis (2016) argues that the task of forging solidarities across geo-cultural spaces requires not only that we empathise with the struggles of others, but also that we understand their struggles as our own. Those looking to Swampscott's radical politics – imagined and not – as an inspiration for contemporary enactments of CP in the US and elsewhere impose a 'linear' and singular origin story onto CP so that it appears to assume its ontological and contextual bearings from a particular, institutionally-sanctioned moment in the US (see Dutta, 2016; Sonn, 2016). As Graham (2017) demonstrates, we perpetuate a mode of injustice when knowledge production is reified and valued in such a singular fashion. The point, though, is not to validate or discredit Swampscott, but to remember and learn from the ways that it engaged social struggle so that today community psychologists, from all over the world, can work together to move the discipline in politically progressive directions. We should exercise caution in not making a fetish of Swampscott, or ignoring the peripheral, and at times overtly politicized, enactments of CP that were taking place all over the world prior to as well as during the formalisation of CP in the US (Fryer, 2008). Here, we agree with Dutta (2016), who calls for de-centring United Statesian CP by considering CP as a multi-stranded project that is attentive to global struggles and their points of convergence. As community psychologists, a reflexive and critical historical appraisal of our discipline necessitates that we learn from psychologies of community, rather than embrace a United Statesian, static conception of CP as a discipline. In moving the discipline in a politically progressive direction, we are required to engage political forces outside of CP as well as outside of the liberal State (see Sarason, 1976; Trickett, 2015). Here, there is a considerable body of critical community psychology work that we may build upon, engage, draw inspiration, and critique (see,



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e.g., Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019; Gokani & Walsh, 2017; Hamber et al., 2001; Kagan et al., 2011; Lykes & Moane, 2009; Moane, 2003; Pretorius-Heuchert & Ahmed, 2001).

Community psychologists all over the world cannot but acknowledge the importance of Swampscott. The conference afforded CP global institutional legitimacy as well as the resources – mainly financial – which accompany this institutionalisation (Montero, 1996). Swampscott's critique of post-positivist psychological standards also opened up space for critical theory within CP (Langhout, 2016). However, being critical of knowledge within CP (see Graham, 2017) requires that we also acknowledge that in seeking new psychological paradigms, Swampscott's agenda was not characterised by emancipatory politics, and should not be remembered as such (Gokani & Walsh, 2017). We should embrace the numerous ways by which psychology in the US and elsewhere (e.g. throughout Latin America, Africa, and Australia) has been wielded in the service of community and social justice, many of which may not be identifiably CP (see Fanon, 1967; Fryer, 2008; Lazarus et al., 2006; Martín-Baró, 1994; Manganyi, 1973/2019; Montero, 2007; Montero & Sonn, 2009). Here, we may engage in historiography not to reify CP's liberal politics through identifying the discipline's origin point, but for purposes of solidarity. In this regard, we can begin to expand the possibilities of what CP can be and break from disciplinary decadence.

## **2.2    *Respect for diversity as liberal tolerance***

Angelique and Culley (2007) highlight that CP, for the most part, remains Euro-centric. Indeed, the discipline has its institutional roots in white, male power, observed in many of the editorial boards of prominent CP journals, as well as CP graduate program coordinators. CP tends to engage only marginally with disability struggles, and deals ineffectively with issues of class (see Walsh & Gokani, 2014). Moreover, a number of authors have argued that issues pertaining to gender (see Cosgrove & McHugh, 2000), and race (see Carolissen et al., 2010) have been attended to inadequately by much of mainstream CP, either by ignoring these issues outright, downplaying them, or failing to engage their intersectional nature. Resultantly, many community psychologists have suggested that if CP is to take on a more progressive politics, it must institute 'respect for diversity' as a core disciplinary value (Bond & Harrell, 2006; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Trickett et al., 1993). Although respect for diversity as a value of CP can be found in early literature (e.g. Rappaport, 1977), it was, in many instances, articulated as a strategy of inclusion that would allow marginalized populations to enter existing structures of oppression. Later, however, critically-minded community psychologists like Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) conceived of diversity as a channel through which to amplify marginalized voices and draw people's attention to oppressive social structures, thereby attempting to invert expert-subject hierarchies (see also Bond & Harrell, 2006; Prilleltensky, 1999). Later still, Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010) attempted to work nuanced conceptions of diversity into a framework of sorts, wherein respect for human diversity constituted a value of relational well-being to be synthesized with the values of personal and collective well-being. A sensitivity toward cultural diversity in this sense is crucial in campaigning for access to social services, irrespective of people's perceived differences (Lazarus, 2007). Added to this, embracing diversity can allow for the celebration of marginalized cultural and epistemic frameworks within CP (Evans, Rosen, & Nelson, 2014), while, at the same time, creating a space for engaging critically with CP itself (see Carolissen, 2006). Thus, in addition to improving the quality and substance of the discipline, taking seriously matters of human diversity within CP is usually posited as a politically progressive project (Carolissen, 2006; Harrell & Bond, 2006; Trickett et al., 1993).



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We wish, however, to argue that critical community psychologists should remain suspicious of a CP that attempts to ‘promote tolerance of and appreciation for diversity’ (Trickett et al., 1993, p. 274) as an inherently progressive politics *in and of itself*. There is much work in CP that attempts to neatly resolve issues of diversity while ignoring avenues of solidarity that are required for collective resistance (Bond & Harrell, 2006; Brodsky & Faryal, 2006). Although diversity is certainly an essential aspect of a politics concerned with social justice (Arfken, 2012), critical CP must resist ‘respect for diversity’ collapsing into liberal notions of tolerance, such as ‘color-blindness’ (see Plaut et al., 2018), or neoliberal multiculturalism (see Kymlicka, 2015), both of which can be used to fetishize difference while only perfunctorily acknowledging issues of power (see Kelley, 2018). Accordingly, liberal tolerance functions by ignoring history and politics as a means of individualizing, naturalizing, psychologizing, and culturalizing conflict (Brown, 2006). In its belief in the possibility for universal consensus (see Wark, 2017), liberal tolerance offers diversity as a surrogate for political struggle. Antagonisms are then managed, rather than addressed, in the hope of creating a passive, docile and deactivated citizenry that disavows fighting for equality through collective solidarity (see Brodsky & Faryal, 2006; Brown, 2006). In this regard, it is the (often oppressive) societal status quo which dictates the kinds of diversity which must be respected as well as that which cannot be tolerated (Brown, 2006; Wark, 2017).

We do not, it must be underscored, believe that those advocating diversity in CP consciously assume liberal, disciplinary decadent political agendas of tolerance. We also do not believe that calls for tolerance in CP are *de facto* reified through liberalism. To the contrary, many critical community psychologists inspired by radical approaches to diversity, inclusion and representation would undoubtedly reject a politics of this kind (see Bond & Harrell, 2006; Brodsky, & Faryal, 2006; Ratele et al., 2018), with the diversity principles posited by Harrell and Bond (2006) offering an especially useful means of thinking beyond liberal tolerance. However, we argue that due in part to the ‘hazy’ and inconsistent manner by which diversity in CP is sometimes conceptualized (see Neal & Neal, 2014; Trickett et al., 1993), as well as the liberalizing impulse of much institutionally-bound CP (Parker, 2015), if unchecked, diversity can lend itself quite readily to liberal tolerance.

Diversity represents a pathway toward justice but should not be confused for justice itself. In challenging disciplinary decadent approaches to diversity and liberal tolerance in CP, it can be useful to look to activist efforts outside of CP. In South Africa, the location from which we write, Steve Biko (1978/2004), a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement during apartheid, insisted that racial integration alone would not resolve South Africa’s deeply embedded social crises. For Biko (1978/2004, p. 20), diversity as liberal tolerance could do little to address people’s ‘inbuilt complexes of superiority and inferiority [which] continue to manifest themselves even in [a] “nonracial” set-up of the integrated complex’. Many studies appear to confirm this, suggesting that merely ‘bringing people together’ has not born fruit with regards to psychosocial justice in post-apartheid South Africa (see, e.g., Dixon et al., 2005; Finchilescu et al., 2007; Soudien, 2004).

If respect for diversity in CP is conceived as the mere interaction between diverse social subjects, movement becomes mistaken for progress, and little room is made for organic solidarity-making. Looking once again to South Africa, in an attempt to understand consciousness outside of the confines of liberal tolerance, Manganyi (1973/2019) argued that political consciousness should be recognised as a kind of mutual knowledge and understanding between struggles. For Manganyi, such mutual knowledge serves as the precondition for solidarity, rather than a hollow ‘coming together’. In this register, progressive politics are not premised on exclusionary development, nor on the liberal tolerance of ‘a hastily arranged integration’ (Biko, 1978/2004, p. 20). Instead, harnessing issues of diversity for socially just purposes advances from an acknowledgement of the profoundly unequal contours of power that mark diverse social terrains.



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It is in this sense that community psychologists can begin to recognize difference not in terms of unbreachable social divisions, but as an element to be engaged seriously by solidarity efforts that endorse psychosocial well-being and that challenge – instead of promote an endurance of – systemically constituted oppression (see Bond & Harrell, 2006). Such a psychology is both ethical and political in character, and seeks “to strengthen civil society while developing a conscious citizenry” (Montero, 2007 p. 520).

Sensitivity toward diversity should always be enacted with people, collaboratively, if collective modalities of autonomy are to be centralised within conceptions of justice (Prilleltensky, 1999). In the final analysis, a progressive approach to diversity seeks not to understand conflict as a product of ‘untolerated’ difference, but historicizes diversity, placing it within its proper socio-political context as a means of fostering solidarities and resistances (Harrell & Bond, 2006). In this regard, diversity represents a central facet of political organising, but does not constitute a political endpoint as such.

### **3. Beyond disciplinary decadence**

In this section, we consider how community psychologists can approach social justice in a manner that resists falling back on a disciplinary decadent liberal politics. Such an undertaking, as we have asserted throughout this article, should begin from within one’s context and outside of CP – especially a reified United Statesian CP – in an effort to expand the discipline’s ecology of knowledge (Sonn, 2016), and adopt a methodology of diffraction that institutes change through agitation (Langhout, 2016). Foucault (2000) refers to this as an ethic of discomfort, which in our case sees a conscious and continuous effort to move toward that which challenges disciplinary presumptions, particularly when these are taken as self-evident. We engage the ethic of discomfort when we attempt to create different, sometimes unsettling, ways of thinking about and doing CP. Thus, in taking seriously Chinua Achebe’s (2018, p. 39) contestation that it is ‘when we are comfortable and inattentive, [that] we run the risk of committing grave injustices absentmindedly’, we can attempt to think beyond CP’s ontological, epistemological and methodological orthodoxies.

#### **3.1 *Unlearning disciplinary comforts***

One place where we can begin to rethink the epistemic, geological and historical coordinates of CP – that is, what is considered ‘proper’ CP and what is not – (see Fryer, 2008; Prilleltensky, 1999) is in CP curricula. Here, we use curriculum in its broadest sense, that is, what is taught, how teaching occurs, and the ethical dimensions of education (Pinar, 2012). Although critical CP curricula have certainly embraced an ethic of discomfort to varying degrees (e.g. Carolissen et al., 2010; Fourie & Terre Blanche, 2019), greater consideration should be extended toward addressing the institutional challenges and pushback that are likely to be encountered when attempting to reimagine CP through thought and action which are, for the most part, located outside of CP.

With regards to parochial historizations of CP, curricula should strive to make theoretical connections between community-engaged psychological work and community struggle (see Dutta, 2016; Sonn, 2016). As such, a range of educators may work to conceptualise CP in a deservedly complex and on-going fashion which, in addition to recognizing CP’s multiple and complex histories, critically appreciates the ways by which various organized social movements have



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informed how we conceive (and how we are able to conceive of) CP (see Montero, 1996; Stevens, 2007). There is, for instance, no reason that community psychologists, medical doctors, social workers, traditional healers and numerous other health practitioners should write their disciplinary histories separately. An example here can be noted in the ‘collaborative writing as method’ technique deployed by Ratele and colleagues (2020). Here, psychology is written into being through a multi-faceted prism of political locations (i.e. feminism, decoloniality, Africa-centredness) in an attempt to unsettle disciplinary orthodoxies and approaches to social justice within psychology. It is in this way that we can appreciate CP’s disciplinary history through different interlocking histories of struggle (see also Dutta, 2016; Fryer, 2008; Stevens, 2007). Analysing how these struggles have opposed or cohered with United Statesian CP’s politics affords us a better understanding of these politics which, in turn, can point toward how we can build relevant and politically progressive psychologies of community. Opposing disciplinary decadent historiographies thus embraces an ethic of discomfort that appreciates how psychology has benefitted communities through means that do not always identify as CP, and do not necessarily conform to a liberal politics.

Unlearning the epistemological comforts which accompany disciplinary decadence requires that all of those involved in developing CP curricula (e.g. community members, course conveners, activists, professors, university learners) are understood as organic intellectuals who seek to better understand the ills of society so that they might work, in an informed and progressive manner, toward social justice (see Gramsci, 1971; Hlatshwayo, 2019). This is not to level the pedagogic playing field, but rather to acknowledge that some people will invariably have greater knowledge in certain areas than others (Burton et al., 2012). Engaging CP curricula collectively and democratically (i.e. uncomfortably) looks to institute a form of dialogic learning, that is, a “practice that produces knowledge, and knowledge that turns into action” (Montero & Sonn, 2009, p. 2). Through such learning, we may draw upon different psychological knowledges to understand different ways of being-in-the-world (see Manganyi 1973/2019; Teo, 2018), as well as reject modes of exploitation, oppression and exclusion (Montero & Sonn, 2009). It is essential that in this process, difficult questions around social (in)justices and psychology are interrogated, such as different uses and definitions of violence; engaging local-global struggle nexuses; power differentials within social justice movements; and navigating empathetic solidarities that are attentive to difference. It is therefore important that we look to the ways by which we – in our numerous and shifting roles as community members, educators, psychologists and citizens (Gokani & Walsh, 2017) – are able to build radically diverse, nuanced and self-aware kinds of CP curricula that do not make a fetish of geographic location, but instead prioritise CP’s numerous historical and political locations (see Stevens, 2007). Once again, there is an important body of critical CP work to be engaged here, including Dutta’s (2016) notion of a multi-stranded CP, Sonn’s (2016) expansion of CP’s ecology of knowledge, and Langhout’s (2016) call for a methodology of diffraction, all of which explore the tensions of articulating a politically progressive CP against the backdrop of neoliberal institutions.

### **3.2    *For conflict***

While an ethic of discomfort is useful for thinking through and beyond diversity as liberal tolerance within CP, we do well to heed Eagle’s (2005) caveat that, although progressive multicultural practice in psychology is attainable, it remains difficult to implement. In discussing the hybridity of culture, Bhabha (1994) advocates difference over diversity. Where the latter is understood as a fixed site of knowledge that closes itself off to other – apparently distinct –



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knowledge forms, the former is conceived of as a process that addresses power differentials, embraces conflict, and fosters individual and collective agency. Drawing on this notion of difference, the meaning of diversity in CP is made somewhat less hazy, and we are able to resist it collapsing into liberalized conceptions of tolerance. Diversity as difference – rather than tolerance – does not signify a series of quantifiable differences that are to be ‘worked through’ (see Brodsky & Faryal, 2006). Rather, such an approach to diversity requires that CP shed the kinds of demarcation, mystique, and specialist functions that mark its ‘professional enactment’, and instead develop innovative modes of galvanizing differences toward social change, *a la* methodologies of diffraction (see Langhout, 2016). As Brodsky and Faryal (2006) argue, a ‘failure’ to bridge diversity in CP can allow us to better understand and identify difference as well as points of solidarity (see also Bond & Harrell, 2006).

Using Bhabha’s (1994) notion of difference as a means of rejecting respect for diversity being enacted as liberal tolerance requires that we embrace conflict (see Wark, 2017). For much CP, conflict has often been treated as malignant; something to be resolved as soon as possible and in a manner that tolerates each discordant view (Brodsky & Faryal, 2006; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Although an explicit embrace of conflict, or for that matter an openly dissident politics, can threaten the employment status of many community psychologists (Burton et al., 2012), aversion to conflict in CP is nonetheless curious when we consider that recognizing the role that conflict and contradiction play in ushering in transformative change has a long tradition in psychological work (e.g. Fanon, 1967; Freud, 1933/1989; Langhout, 2016; Teo, 2018). We propose that CP’s embrace of difference and conflict requires a conscious carving out of critical spaces wherein candid, emotional and uncomfortable discussion can occur. These spaces may include alerting comrades to their unintentional microaggressions within CP engagements; drawing attention to the specific ways by which we re-inscribe liberal politics in our work; and speaking to colleagues about their political blind-spots. Within these spaces, difference becomes the axis against which we formulate common political visions, and where embracing, rather than ‘working through’, conflict becomes the medium through which CP’s politics connect with material reality. It is, in other words, through conflict that we can gain insights into where CP – as a discipline for and with, rather than about, people (see Teo, 2018) – is (and, importantly, where it is not) of use in struggles for social justice. Thus, instead of adhering to a so-called competency model which promotes fragmented assessments within CP (see Akhurst, 2020), we activate what Harrell and Bond (2006) refer to as connected disruption, whereby conflict is continually drawn upon with a view toward solidarity.

This uncomfortable embrace of conflict within CP should not, however, stifle critical CP’s action orientation. Conflict should move CP forward, stretching its capacity to address different, interlocking struggles, rather than paralyzing the discipline altogether. A pertinent example from our own South African context is observed in the Community Storylines project which ‘draws on storytelling and story listening processes, and their productions through digital stories and performing arts as tools for social recognition’ (Lau, 2017, p. 443). Within this project, solidarity-making is not premised on a predetermined vision of politics, but on the democratic determination of this vision through different, uncomfortable and perhaps even incongruent, community stories. In turn, diversity is not fetishized while, at the same time, the quest to find common ground is not over-determined. Instead, Community Storylines demonstrates how tense dialogical processes can serve as the basis for building diverse solidarities which work to locate psychosocial anguish within unjust social structures, rather than individuals with whom we perceive as competition (see Kymlicka, 2015). It is through imperfect and evolving processes like these that we can begin turning CP away from disciplinary decadence by facing it toward ‘living thought’ and action (Gordon, 2014, p. 86). Community Storylines demonstrates that understanding diversity as



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difference, rather than liberal tolerance, can allow for the emergence of a critical CP engagement that is defined ‘less [as] a unified doctrine with a particular method, and more a form of questioning and an attitude in face of the world’ (Lau, 2017, p. 443).

#### **4. Summative conclusions**

This article critically interrogates two common disciplinarily decadent modes of politicizing CP, namely: parochial historicization and respect for diversity as liberal tolerance. Despite frequently drawing on progressive political rhetoric, each of these politicizing strategies, we argue, adheres to a fundamentally liberalized, and even regressive, politics. In turn, politicizing the discipline in these ways can reinforce CP’s complicity with neoliberal governmentability as well as promote adherence to and acceptance of an oppressive status quo, all while making obscure CP’s political limitations and emancipatory capacities.

As a means of breaking from disciplinarily decadent politicizing strategies, we consider how community psychologists might begin to unlearn disciplinary comforts through an ethic of discomfort within their discipline. Such an ethic, we insist, can be threaded through CP curricula and realised in how we embrace conflict and difference. Accordingly, those involved in CP engagements are encouraged to undertake difficult and reflective conversations around social justice; develop complex and multi-stranded disciplinary (and even anti-disciplinary) histories; recognize CP’s emancipatory limitations; and conceive ‘respect for diversity’ as an enactment of difference, rather than liberal tolerance. While an ethic of discomfort does not serve as a panacea for CP’s political constraints, it can will the discipline toward a contextually-sensitive approach that pivots on a democratically constructed progressive politics.

Although critical CP cannot replace radical, autonomous political action (Parker, 2015), it can allow for a complex engagement with psychosocial phenomena (including justice). We argue that problematizing disciplinary decadent modes of politicization within CP can mobilize community psychologists, community members, educators and students through and beyond their shifting roles as professionals, citizens and activists. In order to better meet people’s psychosocial and political needs, the construction of a politically progressive CP, perhaps more than anything else, signifies an abandonment of comfortable, disciplinarily decadent approaches, thereby breaking with the – often muted, disguised or distorted – liberal politics which characterize most psychological practice.

#### **Conflict-of-interest statement**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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