What does *Theory & Psychology* have to offer community-orientated psychologists?

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Abstract

Psychology is awash with different understandings and enactments of relations between theory and action. This article explores coverage in *Theory & Psychology* of such relations from the perspective of four community psychologists who are seeking insights into how to further integrate our theory, research, practice, and teaching activities. We first consider a dedicated special issue on Theory in Action that exemplifies some of the mental gymnastics evident in efforts to work participatively to address practical problems in theoretically informed ways. Our focus then shifts to what we see as a form of disciplinary reflexivity that we detected regarding issues surrounding theory and action across the broader content of *Theory & Psychology*. We conclude with further reflections on how insights from the scholarly papers cited resonate with our own critical praxis and efforts to engage with and address complex social problems, and the importance of cultural considerations in such community scholar activism.

Keywords

Action, community, participation, practice, theory

Psychology is a diverse discipline engaged in a raft of theory, research, practice, and teaching activities. Journals such as *Theory & Psychology* offer valuable repositories for considering how we collectively make sense of efforts to integrate these activities. In responding to an invitation to contribute to this anniversary issue, we collated content from previous issues that addresses links between theory and action. This involved conducting a keyword search of the journal up to and including volume 29 (2019) using the terms action*, engagement*, community*, participative*, activism*, and praxis*. It quickly became apparent that this journal has offered sophisticated reflexive engagements with exemplars of: praxis (Colucci & Colombo, 2018; Gergen & Zielke, 2006), social change initiatives (Parker, 2009; Stephenson & Kippax, 2006), efforts to address men's family violence (Haaken, 2008), resisting homophobia (Russell & Bohan, 2006), promoting the efficacy of feminist practice (Macleod, 2006), engaging in collaborative inquiry (Sugiman, 2006), key concepts in applied scholarship (Parker, 2015), professional deafness to client and community voices (Raeff, 2019; Swartz, 2005), and Indigenous psychologies and decoloniality (Nwoye, 2015, 2017).

As we will illustrate, contributions to the journal do not simply comprise calls for the increased application of theories developed in spaces such as laboratories into field settings. Also evident are sophisticated attempts to understand the dialectics of theory and practice, and how various assemblages of praxis also drive theoretical developments from the field back into the academy. The corpus of articles that were identified also emphasises the need for more holistic approaches to psychology, which include foci on contexts, histories, and social structures that affect various psychological phenomena, and responses from psychologists to human needs.

We cannot do justice to the breadth of domains of application and complexities evident in this journal in a single short review. As such, what follows is a focused effort by four community psychologists to consider how relevant journal content relates to our own efforts to engage in historically situated, culturally located, and economically informed participative practices that are anchored in critical reflexive praxis, community immersion, and relational ethics (Li et al., 2020; Sonn et al., 2019; Stevens & Sonn, in press). We propose that the content of *Theory & Psychology* we identified resonates with our own efforts to articulate community psychology in ways that reflect its contradictory complexities from within our locations in the global South. To begin, we revisit a special issue published over a decade ago on Theory in Action.

Revisiting 2006: A standout issue on Theory in Action

Contributions to the special issue edited by Gergen and Zielke (2006) on Theory in Action raise various matters that remain relevant today and remind us of the diversity of approaches to theory in action in psychology. Readers are offered explorations of: social constructionist collaborative practice (Sugiman, 2006); issues of praxis in addressing the internalisation of homophobia (Russell & Bohan, 2006); an enactment of plural feminisms in intellectual activism and emancipatory practice (Macleod, 2006); the application of discursive theory to everyday emotional work around cruelty to children (Hepburn, 2006); and the role of theory in conceptualising political change in HIV prevention (Stephenson & Kippax, 2006). These authors work to transcend the strict distinction between theory and practice. Contributors also emphasise contextualised forms of knowledge production that are focused beyond the academy. Theory is therefore positioned as an emancipatory conceptual base for proactive change initiatives, which in turn informs further theorising through the dialectics of theory and action.

Reflecting on the collection, Gergen and Zielke (2006) offer several provocations, including the need to move beyond the rigid distinction between theory and practice. This is because theorising is a form of action and is often generated through interactions (often ongoing) with

concerned groups. Reflecting the entanglement of theory and practice, Russell and Bohan (2006) also present theorising as a form of praxis through which psychologists can innovate and imagine new forms of action. Whilst also embracing this idea, Gergen and Zielke (2006) warn readers that top-down theorising from the academy that is fixated on critique above practical helping comes with certain risks. These include: reducing the complexities of issues, alienating concerned groups, diminishing possibilities for scholar and community collaboration, and psychologists treating their own critiques as objective interpretations of situations or problems that are affecting the lives of other people.

What is clear to us from reading this collection in relation to our own field experiences is that for initiatives and efforts to address complex social problems to be rendered as relevant and possible to social change, theory cannot simply exist as an academic exercise in the reified realm of the academy. In fact, theory is often usefully produced through dialogue with various forms of practice (Russell & Bohan, 2006). An example is hereby added in that theoretical efforts to inform the work of Indigenous community psychologists needs to be developed by or with Indigenous communities (Li et al., 2020; Rua et al., in press; Stevens & Sonn, in press). To rely on academic critics from the global North, no matter how well-intentioned, to develop theory regarding Indigenous psychologies is to risk reproducing long-standing patterns of academic colonisation.

In engaging with the complexities of praxis, the 2006 collection brings into question the physical science-derived imperative for psychological theory to be objective and free of cultural and personal bias, proposing instead that theories often emerge through collegial relationships in interpretative communities (cf. Reddy & Morris, 2004). We also support the alternative view that theorising can be rendered more applicable to settings beyond the academy when developed through participative engagements with the phronetic knowledge and wisdom of the groups occupying such settings (cf. Reddy & Morris, 2004; Stephenson & Kippax, 2006).

It is also important for psychologists to resist atomising or psychologising the public into partialised individuals. Central to the special issue is an emphasis on people who are also recognised as enmeshed and entangled social actors. As such, the analyses, practices, and theories of psychologists need to consider the entanglements of persons and their immediate relationships as well as the influence of broader distal social structures or formations that also populate their lives.

Embracing this collaborative ethos, contributions to the 2006 collection demonstrate how the activism of psychologists benefits from close engagements with local experiences and phronetic wisdom that can shed light on the broader functioning of inequitable and dehumanising social structures. An effective example of this way of working is provided by Russell and Bohan (2006), who approach internalised homophobia as a form of social exchange requiring both the analysis of personal experiences and the sociopolitical structures at play in everyday life. Relating this societal orientation towards psychotherapy, Russell and Bohan (2006) propose that "exploring the client's experience *is* exploring the socio-political world she or he inhabits and, conversely, exploring the socio-political world *is* exploring the personal" (p. 354). As these authors note, such an orientation is particularly pertinent when working in oppressive social environments where the individualising and psychologising of social issues can lead to victim blaming from the outside and ineffective responses.

To us, the emphasis on working *with* people whilst paying due consideration to the broader contexts at play in their lives requires a shift in ethics for some. In contributions to the 2006 issue, we detect some of the conceptual groundwork for such a shift away from a physical science-inspired ethics of distance, objectivity, and the generation of universal truths. This shift is towards an ethics of proximity, mutuality, and dialectical engagement that is contingent and often localised, and whereby scholar activists act as part of the local scene, immersing

themselves with local people and their needs (cf. Liu & Hopner, 2020). This proximal orientation comes with mutual accountabilities and responsibilities through which psychologists work alongside people in ways that blur the lines between shared research, practice, theorising, reciprocal learning, and friendships (Li et al., 2020; Rua et al., in press). In keeping with this orientation, Macleod's (2006) grounded account of the enactment of radical plural feminism as a basis for theory/practice in South Africa foregrounds what is also seen as a primary obligation for psychologists to embrace emancipatory values and help others at close range. Sugiman (2006) too presents a reminder of the importance of researcher immersion in the everyday practices of participants. The researcher demonstrates how this can aid in efforts to better understand and respond to the needs of the groups with whom we work closely and interpersonally.

Contributors also offer valuable accounts of the mental gymnastics that come with trying to understand and address social and health problems participatively beyond the academy. This involves combining direct observations and insights that are usually generated through the deployment of immersive qualitative methods with the experiences of participants as well as the philosophical abstractions we carry with us into these engagements. Likewise, in pointing to the utility of such approaches, Stephenson and Kippax (2006) note that effective action rarely goes to plan when based on work developed primarily within the academy. Russell and Bohan (2006) also remind us that effective action initiatives often rely on iterative understandings of the everyday lives of the people living with particular issues and existing, derivative theoretical insights. As such, theorising principally involves much more than a top-down ahistorical testing of ideas in applied settings.

From what we see as this proximal perspective, Stephenson and Kippax (2006) offer further insights into the dynamics of addressing issues surrounding HIV infection when partnering with active social agents in everyday settings where theory and research is necessarily entangled with local lived experiences and collective action. These authors invoke the practical complexities of acting within and theorising from efforts to transform the dynamic complexities of problems as they are lived through everyday relations:

> The role of social research has been to identify the processes of transformation, articulate them, and contribute to discussions and debates in which various actors working on the problems of HIV demand insights from each other. One of the demands made on theory stems from questions about how to acknowledge, harness and support people's active appropriation, knowing that it contributes to ongoing *change* in *social* and sexual relations and it means that there is no ultimate solution to HIV. In short, how can social researchers learn from, work with and rework a moving target? (Stephenson & Kippax, 2006, p. 395)

The proximal orientation evident in the contributions has methodological implications. It is facilitated by the adoption of more flexible and participative orientations to knowledge production and theorising. It requires us to spend more time with research and/or practice participants, to really get to know them, and to work collaboratively with them to make sense of what is going on locally. As Colucci and Colombo (2018) also noted some years later, this proximal orientation has also proved crucial for psychologists to break out from the hegemonic binds of endless "self-referential methodological rigor." This can be used as a tool to embrace the necessary adaptive flexibility for responding to participants and social issues that populate their lives in more multifaceted and dynamic ways. Usefully, Stephenson and Kippax (2006) also demonstrate the utility of the flexible theoretical concept of assemblage in understanding and responding to the dynamics of participant needs and social change. They note that different assemblages can be put in place to address HIV and will be reproduced, appropriated, mimicked, and revised through shifting everyday practices and relations that are driven by the participants themselves as well as other influences on their lifeworlds.

Across the decades: Disciplinary reflexivity regarding action-orientated scholarship

Writing on the crisis in social psychology offers a prominent example of how, during different periods of upheaval (e.g., the Great Depression and the COVID-19 pandemic), psychologists often pause to reflect on the intent, relevance, and applicability of their efforts. Such disciplinary reflections are important in foregrounding knowledge that can contribute to emancipatory practice and ultimately societal transformation. *Theory & Psychology* offers a key forum for these deliberations, which also span the periods between different crises. Such reflexive and often deconstructive scholarship is important for any discipline in terms of providing space for addressing shortcomings in practice as well as opening up spaces for innovation. However important, it must be noted that self-critique is only part of the disciplinary equation and may well prove less effective when detached from practical efforts to help other people, particularly those living in oppressive circumstances. Reflecting on how psychologists theorise food insecurity or homelessness, for example, is a diminished exercise when not coupled with due consideration of practical efforts to enhance how we can help increase access among hungry people to food and shelter. Disciplinary reflexivity in this journal does extend to such practical considerations regarding collective contributions to bettering the human condition (Hill, 2006). This is important because in the absence of practical considerations in efforts to theorise social problems, more progressive or critical psychologists can easily be ignored (cf. Landridget, 2006) and the emancipatory potential of such work may well go unrealised.

Articles in *Theory & Psychology* repeatedly demonstrate the importance of learning from our disciplinary histories and in particular how applied theory and research has shaped the focus, scope, and efficacy of psychology (Hill, 2006; Parker, 2015). For example, Colucci and Colombo (2018) helpfully consider the relationship between what we read as the scholarly activism of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin. Both scholars emphasised the importance of historical events in shaping theory, research, and practice in psychology, and the outward-looking activities. Dewey's applied approach was refined in relation to the Great Depression and Lewin's in response to the Second World War. Despite their differences, both scholars were interested in issues of "emancipatory social relevance," democracy, inclusion, and social change for the betterment of human beings (Colucci & Colombo, 2018). Both stretched their psychologies out from the academy and into society by immersing themselves in the events of the day. A key emphasis for both was converting theory into practical initiatives that were not restricted to local communities. Rather, they also sought to address inequitable social structures that are implicated in a raft of social problems that manifest in local settings (Colucci & Colombo, 2018). Both scholars also advocated interdisciplinary approaches. They embraced the importance of bringing their approaches to psychology into conversation with other disciplines. Such interdisciplinary dialogues were seen as a crucial means of fostering more holistic and dynamic theories of humanity and effective approaches to addressing the social problems that populate their lives. Like more recent critical scholars (Parker, 2009, 2015), Dewey and Lewin emphasised the economic and material basis of psychological phenomena and the importance of direct experience in theorising and working through responses to the issues of the day. Their engaging and problem-focused theory and practice efforts are brought into stark relief as responses to the worldwide economic breakdown that is accompanying the current COVID-19 pandemic are developed.

Articles such as those by Colucci and Colombo (2018) and Parker (2009, 2015) comprise crucial contributions to the collective memory of the discipline, which has a tendency to omit the historical and emancipatory theories and the applied and very political activities of psychologists from mainstream textbook histories (Hodgetts et al., 2020). A key issue that runs through the works of classic figures such as Dewey and Lewin as well as those of their feminist

contemporaries, including Marie Jahoda, is that psychology needs to engage more in making sense of its own and other disciplinary and professional efforts to make the world a more equitable and habitable place for human diversity. Taking a lead from these seminal scholars, there is a clear need for the cultivation of further proximal alliances between psychologists, scholars, and practitioners from other disciplines, in addition to service providers and users to enhance collective efforts to improve the human condition (cf. Parker, 2009).

Again, informing such scholarship is a view of people as socioeconomically immersed and dynamically enacted beings whose "psychological" and situational problems are often structural in origin, rather than a dysfunction of individuals. To further scholarship in relation to this contextualist perspective, Parker (2009) calls for more reflexive work on the political economy of social problems and the focus and scope of our disciplinary responses. Through such contributions, the importance of emplacing people and psychological phenomena historically, socially, and economically beyond the heads of individuals or their direct interactions with others can be seen. It requires development of forms of social psychological analysis that shift the focus beyond individuals or groups and into the broader societal structures at play in community settings, and the academic discipline and profession of psychology.

In considering the broader theorising of action in this journal, we were also reminded of the disciplinary habit of depopulating psychology or losing sight of actual people. Parker (2015) usefully notes that concerns around the depopulating of psychology and the dehumanising treatment of people were key concerns for the "new paradigm" movement in 1970s psychology. This practice of depopulating psychology by transforming human beings into abstract objects, such as variables, data, behaviours, discourses, conditions, or tropes and themes can be seen as a form of epistemic violence (Teo, 2010). On this issue, we agree with Raeff's (2019) critique of how "collecting data" in quantitative psychology is central to transforming people into objects to be analysed objectively and bundled into average patterns that do not really represent anyone in particular. We would add that similar depopulating practices are also evident in some approaches to qualitative psychology where the focus is often on identifying dominant themes, tropes, or discursive formations.

Engaging with the depopulating of psychology, Raeff (2019) usefully extends the work of Billig (2013) on how psychologists use nouns to objectify people. Raeff champions the need for psychologists to do more to reengage with people as complex social actors rather than as transformed objects of scrutiny. Readers are presented with a well- argued call for a greater focus on discursive acts as a unit of analysis in psychology. We agree with Raeff (2019) that "there are increasing calls for conceptualizing human functioning holistically and integratively, as well as for investigating how varied aspects of human functioning mutually affect each other" (p. 321). What is missing from this contribution is due consideration of how the very concept of discursive acts is also a theoretical abstraction that can dehumanise and contribute to the depopulation of the discipline. In our view, repopulating the discipline requires much more than substituting nouns for verbs and a focus on discursive acts. There is also a requirement to go beyond substituting one set of abstractions with another. As Parker (2009) cautions: "Critical psychology needs to provide resources to address that transformation of psychology without getting stuck in any particular model, ethos or worldview" (p. 84).

At this point, we wish to reiterate the point that disciplinary reflexivity is aided by field experiences that also feature in many of the contributions to this journal. This sentiment is overtly evident in Hill's (2006) reflections on the subdisciplinary domain of old or hegemonic applied social psychology. Old psychology features a continued tendency in problem-focused research to fixate on applying overly individualistic theories developed in academic settings (e.g., the laboratory) to settings beyond the academy (cf. Reddy & Morris, 2004). This process is problematic when individualistic theories developed in laboratories with WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic) samples (Henrich et al., 2010) are put into practice

in uncritical ways in the midst of marginalised groups who inhabit very different and less individualistic lifeworlds. To ignore the organic psychologies already at place in such communities, whilst attempting to impose more individualistic orientations, invokes the tendency for disciplinary deafness to the voices of the groups with whom many psychologists work.

In response to such disciplinary tendencies towards deafness and detachment, Swartz (2005) foregrounds the importance of interdisciplinarity through an engagement with subaltern psychology and how we might listen to "the other." This work is important as many psychologists have not been educated to actually hear voices of difference. Contributions from "postcolonial" contexts—in the case of Swartz's South Africa—are a reminder of the importance of working *with* and listening to, rather than imposing disciplinary perspectives *on*, people from the margins. It offers insights into manifesting the reversal of the tendency in some dominant quarters of this discipline to obscure, impose previously held views on, or write marginal participant voices out of research to restrict their roles to functions that we assign to them. Contributors such as Swartz (2005) also remind us that we are better able to hear and understand marginal voices if we actually spend the necessary time with them to build mutually beneficial working relationships and even friendships (cf. Li et al., 2020). Such relationships are particularly helpful in efforts to collaborate *with* community members to produce and apply psychological knowledge that makes sense to them as well, which is also in keeping with their worldviews, and which is actually helpful in addressing their concerns (Li & Forbes, 2018). These close relationships and associated efforts to commune with participants can appear to some psychologists as a source of bias in research, which invalidates research efforts. We do not share this view. As Martin-Baró (1994) asserts, bias towards engaging with, and advocating on behalf of, marginalised groups can be seen as an ethical choice to be relevant and useful to other people.

Immersive and action-orientated participative scholarship that is less deductive or top-down, and that spans the academy and external communities by embracing the dialectics of theory, research, practice, and teaching (we can take our students with us) is particularly important in understanding intercultural collaborations to address social issues. In a contribution that speaks directly to these issues, Haaken (2008) presents a conversation between Indigenous Lakota psychology and psychoanalytic feminism regarding men's family violence through the Cangleska intervention program. Haaken demonstrates the importance of conceptualising practice and associated research through immersive dialogical processes that do not shy away from the negative legacies of colonial histories. Such contextual work is crucial for ensuring dialogue between different worldviews, cultures, and psychologies, and for opening encounter spaces for cultivating meaningful and more sustainable cooperation. It also helps psychologists to avoid the reenactment of oppressive and violent colonial relations of domination and subordination that have contributed to the normalisation of violence in many communities. This participative way of operating is also crucial for repopulating the discipline with conflicted and often contradictory people as well as practitioners who continue to learn and grow on the job. Haaken (2008) proposes that this orientation is crucial "In emphasizing the full humanity of perpetrators, and how interpersonal violence is overdetermined by histories not of their own choosing" (p. 205). Such a perspective opens necessary spaces for working constructively to address men's family violence *with* all family members. Additionally, this way of operating is foundational to efforts to breach and break away from monocultural practices in psychology. As Haaken (2008) asserts, it helps to heal the immediate damage of personal violent acts through invoking cultural accountabilities for the men concerned, as well as for addressing the long-lasting colonial traumas that are implicated in the violence enacted by these men today.

What is a community psychologist to think about all this?

Theory & Psychology offers considerable insights into how psychology engages as a discipline

with the rest of the world in efforts to extend knowledge of social problems and to be useful in addressing these. This journal presents detailed and insightful reflections on the efficacy and limitations of different approaches, and considerations concerning where our discipline has been and is headed. The articles we have selected to review resonate in various ways with our own efforts to engage in praxis from the global South—mobilising, applying, transforming, and [re]producing approaches to a psychology in the service of communities (Li et al., 2020; Stevens & Sonn, in press). In community scholarship, engaging with questions about theory and practice and the deeper assumptions about whose knowledge, on whose terms, and for what purpose are crucial. We might also ask ourselves how open journals in psychology are to ways of knowing, doing, and being that challenge approaches to theory and practice from the global North, which have come to be hegemonic in the discipline. Such questions have been extended in this journal to include a focus on how psychology is often enacted as a kind of politics that reflects the agendas of dominant forces within the discipline and broader socioeconomic system (Parker, 2009, 2015).

Much of the work of community psychologists in the global South does not fit neatly with hegemonic orientations to psychology from the global North. As a result, colleagues often experience considerable difficulty in pitching their work for inclusion in leading journals. Regardless of such tensions around the politics of inclusion and exclusion in the broader discipline, we have gained rich insights in the complexities of critical praxis from reading the content of *Theory & Psychology*. What we have taken away from this exercise is renewed enthusiasm for the benefits of theorising through efforts to immerse ourselves within communities who suffer the consequences of epistemic, cultural, and structural violence (Teo, 2010). We are particularly encouraged to see articles in this very journal that engage and mobilise approaches, such as critical race and postcolonial theory, as well as Indigenous, liberation, and feminist psychologies. It is heartening to witness how open this journal has remained to content from the periphery and global South. *Theory & Psychology* remains an invaluable forum for engaging with key developments, for example, such as those regarding African psychologies (Nwoye, 2015, 2017; Ratele, 2017). Such inclusive publishing practices further support the opening of spaces for culturally informed collaborative work and the Indigenising of the discipline (Stevens & Sonn, in press).

Embracing approaches that have been marginalised, excluded, or wilfully neglected serves as a reminder of the importance of historical and sociopolitical processes in shaping lives and intergroup relations, as well as those versions of the world that have become normalised in the academy. It also is a reminder of the importance of people being able to recognise themselves and others with whom they share cultures in the psychologies they either practise themselves or that are practised on them by strangers (cf. Parker, 2015).

Finally, as many reflect on the importance of theory in action during the COVID-19 crisis, the need to expand the "ecologies of knowledge" (de Sousa Santos, 2007) of the discipline is clear. This can occur by heeding the calls made in *Theory & Psychology* and other progressive outlets for more community engaged, culturally responsive, and ethical forms of critical praxis.

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