Toward Critical Psychology Perspectives of Work-Based Transitions

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The purpose of this Special Issue is to reflect on work-based transitions within a critical psychology framework. Critical psychology is seldom explicitly mentioned in career psychology literature but is often implicitly present. In this introductory article, we are explicit about and briefly explain critical psychology, reflect on how critical psychology can play an important role in work-based transitions, and finally introduce the articles in this Special Issue.

Critical Psychology

Critical psychology is not one approach but takes various forms. At present there is no critical psychology theory or even a single definition of critical psychology that encapsulates its positions. As Hook (2004) stated, it is an approach rather than a theory; an orientation toward psychological knowledge claims, research, and counseling. The history of critical psychology stretches to at least the 19th century when Immanuel Kant presented his critique of rational and empirical psychology. Critical psychology also draws on the works of Friedrich Lange, Wilhelm Dilthey, Lev Vygotsky, Evelyn Keller, Carol Gilligan, Jean-François Lyotard, R. D. Laing, Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, Nikolas Rose, Paul Feyerabend,

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Ignacio Martín-Baró, Dennis Fox, Isaac Prilleltensky, Tod Sloan, Ian Parker, Erica Burman, Kenneth Gergen, and many others (see Teo, 2005). Critical psychology is reflected in many sub-disciplines in psychology, such as community, developmental, organizational, health, lesbian and gay, clinical, cultural, feminist, and social psychology (see Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009) and is also internationally represented (see Sloan, 2000). Critical psychology has a rich tradition in career psychology and includes the work of Ali, Liu, Mahmood, and Arguello (2008), Blustein (2006, 2008), McIlveen and Patton (2006), McWhirter, Blustein, and Perry (2005), Stead and Bakker (2010a, 2010b), and others. It is in this tradition that this Special Issue is presented.

Critical psychology reflects a number of perspectives and some are mentioned below. First, it focuses primarily on oppression and social injustice and how people are marginalized. Marginalization occurs when individuals and groups maintain their power at the expense of others. Such power can be institutionalized and part of the status quo, which can be difficult to alter. Career psychology itself is involved in relations of power, whether in research, counseling, or policy statements. This includes career psychology's role in determining what acceptable psychological knowledge is and what knowledges should be marginalized or ignored. Foucault (1980) referred to power/knowledge, viewing both as two sides of the same coin. This is because he saw power as not only repressive but especially productive and essential to the creation and acceptance of knowledge claims. How power transverses everyday and counseling discourses and maintains oppression and social injustice through its actions or silences is of major concern to critical psychologists (Hook, 2004). Rose (1985) extended Foucault's conception of power through the term *psy-complex* which refers to the complex network of psychological terminology. In his view, such terminology and its associated discourse not only assist clients, but are also normalizing, with the end goal being self-regulation.

Second, critical psychologists also question mainstream epistemological (i.e., meaning of knowledge), ontological (i.e., meaning of reality and being), and axiological (i.e., values) perspectives. They question psychology's natural-science based collection and analysis of data (epistemology), its individualism and its associated reductionism (ontology) and, according to Prilleltensky and Fox (1997), its focus on individualism at the expense of values associated with relationships, mutuality and a sense of community (axiology). With regard to methodology, critical psychologists question its excessive adherence to the type of career research conducted (e.g., individualist, reductionistic research). This is not a critique of quantitative research per se, but what Teo (2005) referred to as *methodologism*, that is, the focus being on method, with the research problem being secondary. An excessive focus on one method can result in certain research problems being minimized, as not all problems are best addressed through experimental or quantitative means.

Third, critical psychologists question the lack of emphasis on the role historical and cultural factors play in marginalizing people, and the way that psychology separates so-called external factors from internal ones. Parker (2002) viewed psychology

as the " . . . systematic reduction of cultural and historical phenomena to the level of the individual . . . " (p. 2). Critical psychologists view knowledge as primarily local, contextualized and constructed rather than discovered, and thus career psychology is seen as a cultural enterprise rather than having potentially universal applications (Moghaddam & Studer, 1997).

Fourth, critical psychologists also study political factors and how they impact on the well-being of individuals, rather than only focusing on the individual or the individual's immediate context. Psychology is viewed as a political endeavor and a so-called neutral and objective stance in research and counseling is also viewed as political. Examples of the political in psychology can be found in Fox and Prilleltensky (1997) and Fox et al. (2009) and in career psychology include Nicholas, Naidoo, and Pretorius (2006) and Santos and Ferreira (1998), among others.

Critical Psychology and Work-Based Transitions

Critical psychology can make a significant contribution to career psychology in general, and specifically to work-based transitions as the articles by major authors in this Special Issue demonstrate. Regarding work-based transitions, there has been a lack of distributive-justice and equity in the services and resources provided to many people, including non-college bound youth and marginalized people (Blustein, 2006). Such transitions are often hindered by structural inequalities, economic and political inequities, and perceived barriers. To expect people to design their lives or adjust and adapt to the working world's requirements contributes to the mainte-nance of the status quo through individualism and ignores the limited choices (and in some cases, no choices) many people have, through structural factors. At the same time, career counselors and career psychologists are generally taught to help their clients do precisely that: adjust and adapt as best as they can on a case-by-case basis. This is the *modus operandi* of practice; otherwise, one is thought to be doing a disservice by not helping the client with his or her presenting problems. It is this fundamental tension between the individual and the system that is brought to the forefront of our consideration in the compelling lead article by Prilleltensky and Stead. In short, the authors propose the *adjust-challenge dilemma* as a conceptual foundation for describing and analyzing four different configurations of practice in career counseling, each with their own set of assumptions and consequences. Provocative in tone and earnest in its style, this article is what the field needs, at this moment, amidst its own paradigm shifts pertaining to moving from social justice rhetoric to social justice practice, including the appropriate place for social justice in the work of career counselors (Metz & Guichard, 2009).

The next three articles in the Special Issue exemplify the many variations of research, scholarship, and practice that a critical psychology approach can manifest. The first article by Ali, Yang, Button, and McCoy is a case study of a career educa-tion program delivered in three rural high schools using mixed methods. The authors provide an innovative rationale and description of how critical psychology can be

meaningfully applied in the context of designing, implementing, and evaluating an intervention that is intended to promote systemic change. In doing so, they combine the traditional tenets of social cognitive career theory with facets of critical psychology in a complementary and dynamic manner. In the second article by McWhirter and McWhirter, an international perspective is highlighted by applying a critical psychology approach to the career and educational development of youth in Latin America. Based on their extensive experience working on behalf of students and families in Chile, the authors lay out in rich detail a panoramic view of the historical, educational, professional, and cultural context of Chile as it pertains to the career development and vocational guidance of adolescents. This extraordinary collection of work illustrates how social justice efforts being undertaken overseas are sorely needed in order to enact a critical psychology perspective to its fullest and most inclusive sense. The third article by Blustein, Medvide, and Wan departs from the earlier focus on school-to-work transition and youth by concentrating on work and unemployment transitions in policy and practices. As with the other articles, the topic is highly important and timely. In today's climate, scholars seem to have a greater interest in studying unemployment and job loss in the wake of the economic recession. While this reaction is understandable, the authors suggest that such attention is long overdue, and should not necessarily end once the recession is over. The positions they take in challenging conventional ways of thinking about unemployment and promoting the transition back into the workforce will provide a much needed springboard for initiating new lines of theory, research, and practice.

Collectively, this series of articles weaves together thematic challenges and opportunities that a critical psychology approach can illuminate for the field in ways that other paradigms or theoretical models cannot on their own philosophical standings or scientific merits. Though just a taste of its many possibilities, the research and scholarship contained in this Special Issue gives us a vibrant snapshot of what this line of thinking, inquiry, and change can do, especially among those who are in most need of our resources, advocacy, and academic expertise. We invite the readers to hang their expectations in abeyance for a moment and wade deeply in the waters with an eye for taking risks. It is our hope that this Special Issue will contribute to the quality and the dignity of our lifelong attempts of questioning the status quo, and the inspiration that it brings to our work and those around us.

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