



Commentary

Embracing our principles and moral compass

Adoptar nuestros principios y brújula moral

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“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.”

Jane Addams

Despite the fact that we are living in a time in history of much wealth in western societies, social, health, and economic inequalities around the world continue to increase. Humanitarian crises like the one involving thousands of Central American people escaping violence and poverty, crossing the United States border, or like the hundreds of African people emigrating to the south of Spain and other European countries, searching for a better future are becoming ever more common. Similar challenges are experienced by many other marginalized groups such as individuals with disabilities and ethnic and racial minorities. We are experiencing times of humanitarian crisis and growing inequalities. The common themes of this special issue – inequalities experienced by vulnerable populations, social justice issues, and innovations to address these issues – are threaded together here by calling attention to the themes of resilience, acculturation, empowerment, and social networking.

This special issue sheds light on the injustices and issues that concern migrants, ethnically and racially diverse populations, women, and people with disabilities. To transform the lives of individuals who experience marginalization in society we need to better understand their context and the issues that deny them social justice. Such is the case of Genkova and her colleagues in the study of acculturation and psychological and social adjustment of older Russian immigrants; the examination of healthcare inequalities among immigrant women as described by Hernandez-Plaza and her colleagues; the individual, interpersonal, and socioeconomic factors that influence the help-seeking response of Latino women who have been victimized as described by Sabina and her colleagues; and the experience of consumers in the healthcare system as described by McAuliff and her colleagues.

The inequalities that women experience are another important thread in this volume: inequalities in maternal and child healthcare, inequalities caused by poverty and immigrant status, or those caused by victimization or lack of healthcare services. Historically, women

have experienced the different forms of marginalization and oppression well reflected in these articles.

Community psychologists in this special issue raise important questions, study issues that matter to others, give a voice to marginalized populations, and in some cases, design interventions that are empowering and that address the needs of vulnerable populations. Such is the article by Balcazar and his colleagues about the self-entrepreneurial efforts by minority individuals with disabilities who are often discriminated and denied employment opportunities; Worton and her colleagues with the description of Better Beginnings – a community, evidence-based approach to promoting childhood development; and Freitas and her colleagues in the case of involving immigrant users in transforming healthcare services.

One critical aspect of how we conduct our work, that sets us apart from other fields of psychology, is our moral compass. We adhere to a set of principles and values that guide our work. A distinguishing feature of community psychologists' ideology is that we pay particular attention to marginalized and oppressed communities and use methodologies that give them a voice. Community-psychology research has been guided by the principles of (a) social change and social justice, (b) respect for diversity and multiculturalism, and (c) empowerment of individuals, groups, and communities (see Levine, Perkins, & Perkins, 2005, for a discussion of additional values, such as sense of community and community collaboration). Here are some examples of how the articles in this special issue address some of the principles of community psychology:

a) Social change and social justice. Social change to promote social justice is a cornerstone principle of community psychology. Much research has been dedicated to designing and implementing community interventions that promote equality and social justice (see Wolff, 2010). Social justice encompasses the political, social, and economic rights of individuals in a given society (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Paloma, Garcia-Ramirez, & Camacho, in press). According to Austin (2001), “The central assumption of the rights paradigm is that every person can make certain claims based solely on their humanness” (p. 184). All societies should provide and meet the basic needs of its members; however, we know that in many communities this is not happening. Marginalized individuals depicted here – low-income individuals, Latina women, recent

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immigrants, migrant workers, and individuals with disabilities – have not been allowed to claim their rights. Nevertheless, in this special issue, three of the papers embrace social justice principles. For instance, Freitas (from Portugal) and his colleagues from Malta, Spain, and Norway describe the involvement of migrant populations in health services as a process of facilitating changes in healthcare policy. This effort was conducted through community mobilization, socio-political development, and the creation of community alliances and coalitions. This article also clearly illustrates the scope and breadth of community psychology in an inter-university project across four European countries. Including migrant populations in the selection and identification of health services is one way to address social justice.

Another article that embraces social justice and social change is the study by Balcazar and colleagues. The authors described an empowering self-entrepreneur employment initiative aimed at improving systems. Given the limited employment opportunities available to individuals with disabilities and the discrimination from employers and society in general that they often face (see Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2013), self-employment and entrepreneurship is an alternative that is grounded in the principles of empowerment, self-determination, and social change. Unfortunately, entrepreneurship opportunities have been scarce for individuals with disabilities as many service providers think that individuals with disabilities cannot own their own businesses or that they do not have the skills or resources needed to succeed. Individuals with disabilities in this study broke stigma and stereotypes. They overcame societal barriers and negative attitudes to demonstrate that they can – just as able-bodied do – start their own businesses and become empowered in the process. The researchers and their community partners in this study became agents of change who can transform the lives of individuals with disabilities.

b) Respect for diversity and multiculturalism. Community psychologists recognize human diversity as a strength in any society (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994). Basically, all individuals have the right to be different. This respect for diversity translates into conscious efforts to study diversity in all its dimensions, using methodological strategies that respect diversity and study diverse populations in their contexts. This focus emphasizes the conscientious choice of community psychologists to study oppressed and marginalized populations, with a strong recognition of the role that culture, ethnicity, gender, and other dimensions of diversity play in determining the way some groups are discriminated against or are given opportunities to participate in their societies and fulfill their roles and dreams (Suarez-Balcazar, Balcazar, Garcia-Ramirez, & Taylor-Ritzler, 2014).

Diversity is clearly a common thread across the themes in this special issue. Several articles help us understand the inequalities experienced by diverse populations. As such, Hernandez-Plaza and her colleagues found that immigrant women of reproductive age were not receiving healthcare services, did not have access to a family doctor, could not afford the prescribed medicines or diagnostic tests, and experienced excessively long waits to see a doctor. This study illustrates the power imbalance between individuals who are oppressed and the people and systems that oppress them. In the study by Genkova and her colleagues, diversity is threaded as a theme to better understand a growing segment of the population that is little understood – immigrant Russian elderly. This study promotes a better understanding of acculturation adjustment of elderly immigrants. Taking a life-domain approach, the authors found that both host and heritage acculturation play a role in the adjustment of the elderly to the American way of life. Diversity is a central concept in the study conducted by Sabina and her colleagues in which they interviewed recent immigrant Latina women to examine interpersonal victimization and self-seeking behaviors. In all, the articles illustrated in this special issue focus on understanding

the lived experiences of individuals from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

c) Empowerment of individuals, groups, and communities. Empowerment is conceptualized as the process by which individuals, groups and communities gain control over decisions that affect their lives (Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment is viewed as an individual and group process, as an experiential and psychological process (Fawcett et al., 1994). From an ecological perspective, empowerment is exercised at different levels of change, including the individual, family or kinship, organizational (school settings, community agencies, and faith-based groups), neighborhood, city, or broader society levels (Fawcett et al., 1994). This principle is illustrated across several articles in this special issue. As such, McAuliff and her colleagues used an empowerment approach in which focus groups were used to give managed-care program consumers a voice regarding their experiences in enrolling in managed care, access to care, and communication with managed-care organizations and providers. Empowerment at the group level is illustrated in the article by Freitas and her colleagues. As such, immigrants in local communities participated in defining the issues, designing solutions, and making decisions about healthcare services at the local level.

As a society, we have a responsibility towards members who have not had fair

opportunities to make a decent living free of domination, oppression, and violence. Every member of society should have the opportunity to be an active participant, not merely a spectator. As such, in the Better Beginnings community-based child development program described by Worton and her colleagues, community residents participated in the planning and implementation phases of the program, enhancing their ownership and building their capacity. By the nature of their community partnerships, the program transformed the community and schools.

Overall, community psychology researchers played an important role in promoting the study of social change, social justice and oppression. Oppression results from asymmetric power relations shaped by domination and subordination. Unfortunately, these psychological manipulations often succeed, and oppressed groups internalize perceptions of inferiority, accepting with resignation their “destiny” in the social structure of society.

Our emphasis on social justice and social change, respect for diversity, and empowerment, as illustrated in this special issue, can facilitate the process of transformation. Although community transformation has not been included as a principle of community psychology, it is well described in some of the articles (see Worton and colleagues). Mezirow and Associates (2000) introduced the theory of transformation in his writing on adult learning theories. The transformative theory refers to how learners construe, validate, interpret, and reformulate the meaning of their experiences. Within this theory, critical reflection leads then to transformation – a process of change. I may argue that in the studies illustrated here, not only communities (see Better Beginnings program), and individuals (see article on self-employment) are transformed, but perhaps researchers are also transformed in their ways of thinking, conducting research, working with marginalized individuals, and understanding the experiences of marginalized people. Transformation – at the level of the targeted community or the investigator – implies enlightening experiences that change the way we think or interpret an issue or a population resulting in changes in behavior, changes in services, practices or policies and/or changes on how we conduct research. Investigators transformation may imply moving from a paternalistic approach to engaging with marginalized communities to one that fosters empowerment and self-reliance. We need to further examine the roles of social change and social justice, on individual and community transformation as well as the community psychologist's process of transformational learning.

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