Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Health and Social Justice Activism in Changing Times"

# Activism in Changing Times: Reinvigorating Community Psychology – Introduction to the Special Thematic Section

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## Abstract

The field of community psychology has for decades concerned itself with the theory and practice of bottom-up emancipatory efforts to tackle health inequalities and other social injustices, often assuming a consensus around values of equality, tolerance and human rights. However, recent global socio-political shifts, particularly the individualisation of neoliberalism and the rise of intolerant, exclusionary politics, have shaken those assumptions, creating what many perceive to be exceptionally hostile conditions for emancipatory activism. This special thematic section brings together a diverse series of articles which address how health and social justice activists are responding to contemporary conditions, in the interest of re-invigorating community psychology's contribution to emancipatory efforts. The current article introduces our collective conceptualisation of these 'changing times', the challenges they pose, and four openings offered by the collection of articles. Firstly, against the backdrop of neoliberal hegemony, these articles argue for a return to community psychology's core principle of relationality. Secondly, articles identify novel sources of disruptive community agency, in the resistant identities of nonconformist groups, and new, technologically-mediated communicative relations. Thirdly, articles prompt a critical reflection on the potentials and tensions of scholar-activist-community relationships. Fourthly, and collectively, the articles inspire a politics of hope rather than of despair. Building on the creativity of the activists and authors represented in this special section, we conclude that the environment of neoliberal individualism and intolerance, rather than rendering community psychology outdated, serves to re-invigorate its core commitment to relationality, and to a bold and combative scholar-activism.

*Keywords:* activism, neoliberalism, individualism, relationality, social justice, health justice, agency, resistance, scholar-activist, hope

## Resumen

Por décadas, el campo de la psicología comunitaria se ha preocupado por aspectos teóricos y prácticos del esfuerzo emancipatorio para enfrentar desigualdades en salud y otras injusticias, muchas veces asumiendo un consenso en torno a valores como la igualdad, la tolerancia y los derechos humanos. Sin embargo, cambios socio-políticos recientes, particularmente la fuerza individualizadora del neoliberalismo y el auge de políticas exclusionarias e intolerantes, han conmovido esas asunciones, creando lo que muchos perciben como un escenario excepcionalmente hostil para el activismo emancipatorio. Esta sección especial reúne una serie diversa de artículos orientados a entender la forma en que activistas en salud y justicia social están respondiendo a las condiciones contemporáneas, con el interés de darle un nuevo ímpetu a la contribución de la psicología comunitaria a estos esfuerzos emancipatorio. Este artículo introduce nuestra conceptualización colectiva de estos 'tiempo cambiantes', los desafíos que ellos introducen and cuatro aperturas ofrecidas por la colección de artículos. En primer lugar, en un contexto de hegemonía neoliberal, estos artículos llaman a un retorno al núcleo relacional de la psicología comunitaria. En segundo lugar, ellos identifican fuentes nuevas de agencia comunitaria disruptiva, en las identidades resistentes, en los grupos no-conformes y en las nuevas relaciones comunicativas mediadas por la tecnología. En tercer lugar, los artículos empujan una reflexión crítica sobre los potenciales y tensiones de la relación entre academia, activismo y comunidad. En cuarto lugar, y de forma colectiva, los artículos inspiran una política de la esperanza, mas que una de la desesperación.

Construyendo sobre la creatividad de activistas y autores representados en esta sección especial, concluimos que este escenario socio-político marcado por el individualismo neoliberal y la intolerancia no vuelven obsoleta a la psicología comunitaria sino que sirve para fortalecer su compromiso esencial con la relacionalidad, y con un activismo radical y combativo.

*Palabras Clave:* Activism, neoliberalismo, individualism, relacionalidad, justiciar social, justiciar en salud, agencia, resistencia, académico-activista, esperanza

This special thematic section is a response to a rapidly changing socio-political environment, which we as guest editors, and many of the authors represented here, often view as hostile to the progressive social and health justice activism that has been inherent to the discipline of community psychology. It brings together a series of articles on the topic of contemporary health and social justice activism, to enrich and develop our vision of contemporary activism, and of how community psychology might engage productively with activism in the 21st century. We aim to contribute to reinvigorating community psychology's capacity to respond creatively to these 'changing times'. In this introductory article, we set out our collective understanding of the 'changing times' and the challenges which they pose to the emancipatory interests characteristic of community psychology. We then discuss the openings to creative, transformative activism identified in this collection of papers.

# Community Psychology in 'Changing Times'

The field of community psychology emerged in the 20th century as a critical response to the health inequalities and other forms of social injustice faced by marginalised communities. The traditional canon of community psychology, founded on the work of scholar-activists such as Paulo Freire (1970/2018) and Saul Alinsky (1971/1989), conceptualises activism as arising out of the dialogue between external change agents and disadvantaged groupings, to develop a critical awareness of the social roots of their personal problems. The recognition that their problems are socially rooted rather than the result of bad luck or personal failings, is seen to form the basis of solidarity amongst the excluded. Ideally this leads to their engagement and organisation in collective action (often in partnership with more powerful allies) to demand some sort of redistribution of health-enabling economic wealth and/or political power. It is an emancipatory and progressive project. As typically discussed, the distinction between oppressed/oppressor, justice/injustice have been assumed to be clear, and mobilisation and activism have been seen as the route to achieving a defined social justice goal. This model has energised creative and transformative community psychology collaborations over half a century (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Rappaport & Seidman, 2000; Seedat, Duncan, & Lazarus, 2001). As community psychology scholars who identify with this tradition, in recent years, we have experienced and witnessed a widespread sense of despair at socio-political changes cre-

ating exceptionally hostile conditions for emancipatory activism. This special section creates a space to consider the relevance of traditional community psychology concepts and purposes, in our 'changing times'.

Informed by the descriptions and diagnosis expressed in the papers in this special section, we characterise these times along two dimensions, firstly, the intensification of the individualisation of neoliberalism and secondly, the resurgence of intolerant, exclusionary politics.

Community psychology emerged partly as a response to failures of traditional, individualistic psychology to understand and to tackle injustices stemming from a global liberal order (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018, this section; Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddique, 2011; Martin-Baro, 1996). Building on the work of the contributors to the special section, we suggest that these injustices have become even more acute, characterising this period as one of 'peak neoliberalism', after Danny Dorling's (2018) diagnosis of 'peak inequality' in the UK context. By 'peak' we are pointing to the intensification of certain conditions, rather than to a sense of a climax that precedes a resolution or end. In different ways, the papers collected here articulate the extreme individualisation and inequality occasioned by neoliberalism, and a deep sense that the resultant suffering and forms of oppression are no longer tolerable but call for action (see also Piketty, 2014). Social institutions increasingly operate on the basis of notions of personhood that ignore – or directly exclude – the socially contextualised nature of human existence (Capri & Swartz, 2018, this section; Davies, 2014; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018, this section; Fine, 2016; Speer & Han, 2018, this section). Racist institutions hide behind liberal claims of colourblindness (Crenshaw & Peller, 2013; Fernández, Gaston, Nguyen, Rovaris, Robinson, & Aguilar, 2018, this section). Collective action, at the same time, is undermined by growing material insecurity and precarity, and by the consolidation of ways of life defined by competitive individualism (Radiszcz & Sir, 2018, this section; Rose, 2018, this section; Speer & Han, 2018, this section). Such a situation often impacts very negatively on the life chances, well-being and even the survival of those positioned outside of the mainstream of dominant groups (Capri & Swartz, 2018, this section; Fernández et al., 2018, this section; Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot, & Tankel, 2014; Rose, 2018, this section). On one hand, this individualising and unequal environment is destructive of the conditions for social and health justice activism. On the other, the unbearable nature of these conditions for many excluded groups opens up new spaces to practise and think about activism (Holloway, 2010).

The emancipatory community psychology which we have outlined was also underpinned by a belief in the social injustice of power inequalities, and a belief in the rights of all human beings to lives characterised by health and dignity – values which were fairly widely accepted (though often more in principle than practice) in western societies in the late 20th century. However, the 21st century has seen an erosion of these previously taken-for-granted values (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) and a growing lack of faith in the power of liberal democracies to serve the needs of those with least access to the fruits of globalised industrialised economies (Hochschild, 2016). The successes of right-wing populist leaders and movements in countries in every continent can be seen as one response to the failures of neoliberalism to secure sustaining livelihoods and optimistic futures for large groups of citizens (Fine, 2016; Mouffe, 2018). This populism mobilises a preoccupation with narrowly defined national identities, a growing hostility towards those perceived as 'outsiders' (including immigrants and people with non-mainstream sexualities and lifestyles), and a growing tolerance of racist, sexist and other forms of discriminatory behaviour (Cramer, 2016).

At the same time old alignments of social groupings, such as the political left and right, distinctions between men and women, rich and poor, oppressors and oppressed, and so on are shifting in unpredictable ways, which force

us to rethink the ways in which activism can challenge contemporary social inequalities. There is also a need for us to rethink how traditional forms of commonality and solidarity (e.g. among women, indigenous groups or people with certain disabilities) are complicated by intersectional identities and differences, which challenge more simple understandings of the boundaries and alliances between the powerful and the powerless (Crenshaw, 2008). And while community psychology has often concerned itself with the circumstances of small-scale, excluded and minoritised groups, it is increasingly argued that contemporary economic and social policies disadvantage the *majority*, while only a tiny minority elite benefit (Piketty, 2014) – the growth of debt and financialisation of the economy (Graeber, 2011), and the devastation of climate change have attracted particular attention.

# Our Trajectory: Community Health Psychology at the LSE

Most of the papers in this special section were discussed at a workshop at the London School of Economics (LSE) in December 2017, entitled 'Rethinking health and social justice activism in a post-liberal world'. This was the latest of a rolling series of workshops and associated special issues in which LSE scholar-activists in the field of community health have sought to interrogate and invigorate the role of community psychology in the context of a changing social world over 20 years. Early volumes focused on the psycho-social mediators between community mobilisation and health (Jovchelovitch & Campbell, 2000) and the distinction between accommodationist and critical forms of community psychology (Murray & Campbell, 2004). Later volumes explored the complexities of mobilising local communities in a rapidly globalising world, especially in the context of international 'development' (Campbell & Burgess, 2012; Campbell, Cornish, & Skovdal, 2012). They called for a new generation of community psychology approaches that moved beyond local community activism to engage in more ambitious forms of activism and resistance to challenge the wider macro-social inequalities that framed local community life (Cornish & Campbell, 2010). The latter volume was informed by a materialist approach to activism – viewed as a power struggle between clearly definable groups: the powerless vs. the powerful. Later Campbell and Cornish (2014) called for more complex approaches to social change activism – ones that took greater account of the complexity of power relationships, in relation to both their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2008) and their micro-capillarity (Foucault, 1977). Against this backdrop, and in a context of a global upsurge in experiments in direct democracy and intentional communities, Cornish, Haaken, Moskovitz, and Jackson (2016) explored engagements between psychological theorising and 'prefigurative politics'. This volume encouraged scholars to see emancipatory social change where we might not have previously seen it – in implicitly critical or transformative activities – but also to interrogate the links between small-scale and large-scale social change. Almost at the same moment, large-scale social change in the form of a global rise of authoritarian populism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; The Economist 2018) and a politics of self-interest and exclusion (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016) seemed to make a mockery of such emancipatory potentialities and it is this emerging environment that set the scene for the current special section.

# Goals of the Special Section

In our call for papers for the current special thematic section, we asked our contributors to submit papers on how health and social justice activists are responding to changing social conditions characterising the early 21st century, and the role of community psychology in this context. We sought to explore the challenges that such conditions pose to the theory and practice of a community psychology developed in an era that was characterised by a

greater faith in concepts such as democracy, human rights and social justice, especially in more affluent western settings. We questioned whether such a hostile environment rendered community psychology assumptions outdated. The papers address those challenges and draw on their analyses of activist practices to prompt a reinvigoration of established community psychology concepts, as well as to point to new creative tensions. The papers open four broad directions.

First, papers track how contemporary individualisation and co-option of traditional community psychology concepts have changed the landscape for social justice activism. In response, some authors call for a reaffirmation and reinvigoration of the traditional canon of community psychology, particularly its basic insight that the relationality of 'community' – and not the isolated individual – is the condition of possibility for projects of social mobilisation and for social justice. In this line two main questions are opened up: How are traditional community psychology concepts co-opted and neutralised? Why are traditional community psychology concepts needed again?

Second, new disruptive sources of agency are identified by papers, some of which celebrate the subversive resistance of people with nonconformist identities and practices, and some of which focus on the ways in which communications technologies disrupt, challenge and renew activist and scholar-activist interests.

Third, the papers interrogate assumptions about the nature of the insider/outsider partnerships inscribed in the model of activism and social change traditionally espoused by community psychology. Some offer positive examples of ways that scholar-activists work in partnership with communities to produce knowledge that reflects those communities' interests rather than the interests of dominant groups or systems, while others problematise the scholar-activist-community relation, exploring its tensions.

Finally several papers provide evidence and inspiration for a politics of hope in dismal times.

In this introductory article we pick out some of the light the papers throw on each of these themes. Whilst it is obviously impossible to do justice to the complex and multi-layered insights from each paper in a short piece of this nature, our discussion seeks to highlight a few of what we consider to be key insights.

The papers draw on experiences in countries including Australia, Canada, Chile, India, Nicaragua, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States as well as various global media environments. They reflect different academic disciplines (mostly psychology, but also sociology, anthropology, media studies and public health). Activist groups include users of local health services, LGBTQ/Gender Expansive youth, water and sanitation activists, user-survivors of mental health services, persons with intellectual disabilities and students of colour among others. Finally, forms of activism include direct and confrontational forms such as protest marches, 'bare life politics' (bringing private bodily functions into the public eye), activist-academic partnerships in knowledge production, support groups, evidence-based activism and queer activism. They also include other hidden or subtle forms of activism such as intimate activisms, radical wit, wilful subjectivities and refusal to conform through resistant identity construction. Across this diverse subject matter, all the papers remain committed to the values of social equality and rights to health, well-being and social justice, within a paradigm of relationality, characteristic of long-established community psychology.

# A Return to Relationality in a Context of Co-Option

Several papers chart ways in which conditions of neoliberalism have worked to threaten, neutralise, or co-opt health and social justice activism in recent years. These papers show the changing environment of activism and the need for activism to re-invent itself to keep up with these challenges. At a very basic level, the neoliberal conditions of austerity have removed state support for user groups that might otherwise have resulted in justice-promoting activism. Rose (2018, this section) discusses how austerity policies in the UK have had disproportion-ately negative consequences for many mental health service users in ways that put their lives in risk. The associated withdrawal of any kind of support from the National Health Service (NHS) for independent collective action by users has threatened the very existence of vital mental health service user groups.

Activism is also aggressively silenced and threatened. Barnes (2018, this section) provides a case study of the silencing of activists' voices in his study of South Africa's 'poo protests'. Impoverished township residents have sought to draw attention to their lack of access to water and sanitation by activities such as throwing excrement at politicians and smearing it on the walls of a nearby international airport. South Africa is 'the protest capital of the world', with multiple social movements actively highlighting the state's failures to address historical injustices. Yet these social movements are increasingly met with hostile public responses, with their efforts frequently under-mined, vilified and dismissed. Barnes' case study interrogates how dominant groupings in government and media manipulate allegedly radical notions (such as 'active citizenship') to blame the poor for government failures to provide water and sanitation, and reinterpret justice-linked notions (such as 'representative democracy') to dis-credit and delegitimise protest.

This theme of the co-option of potentially emancipatory ideas which have been core to community psychology is taken up by other papers suggesting that traditional values of community psychology have in some ways become victims of their own success. After being taken up by powerful, large-scale organisations, participatory projects may become bureaucratised and depoliticised, becoming tools of governance that contribute to the maintenance of the status quo, rather than serving as strategies for resistance and change by excluded groups (Cornish, Priego-Hernandez, Campbell, Mburu, & McLean, 2014).

Speer and Han (2018, this section) make this argument clearly in relation to the core community psychology practice of 'community organizing'. They argue that the tradition of democratic community organising in the USA has been undermined through a number of neoliberal trends. Political parties have taken up tools of community organisation, but employ them in an individualising, instrumental way, prioritising 'numbers of individuals mobilised' to turn up to a meeting, or to turn up to vote, rather than the building of 'deep empowering sustainable community structures'. Speer and Han describe this 'mobilisation' approach as anti-democratic, in that the participation of ordinary people in collective life is not treated as important. It is also conservative, in that no new leaders, structures, or relationships are created, and thus no route to new sources of power for change. In the UK context, Walker et al. (2018, this section) points to the hollowing out of the potentially radical notion of public participation in defining the shape of the National Health Service. This has involved the reduction of the role of participants in public con-sultation about health services from that of 'citizens with views on the wider shape of society' (including issues such as privatisation and funding policy) to that of 'consumers concerned with their individual experiences of health services'.

Two papers directly address the dilemmas for health justice activists of engaging with medicalising diagnoses, with contrasting conclusions in their different contexts. In relation to activism around 'attention deficit disorders' in Chile, Radiszcz and Sir (2018, this section) argue that the limited advocacy that exists has taken an individualising and medicalising form, with parents campaigning for recognition and diagnosis of ADHD as a condition, which thereby merits treatment. They suggest that this approach misses opportunities for a much more radical militancy campaigning for the recognition of neurodiversity and challenging the societal value given to limiting focus on 'attention'. However, Rose's (2018, this section) paper from the UK offers a very different position on diagnosis, in that country's particular history. Rose sets out how the deprivation and stress brought about by austerity has forced mental health service user/survivor activists to re-define their struggles, coalitions and antagonists. Whereas the violence of diagnosis and treatment as implemented by psychology and psychiatry were targeted by mental health activists as the greatest threat in the past, the recent context of austerity changes that landscape. In a context of cuts to state-provided welfare assistance, activists are concerned that anti-diagnosis arguments may now offer a rationalisation to reduce or remove benefit payments. Thus, mental health activists have come to see the neoliberal state as the greatest threat, and diagnoses as potentially welcome, in that they imply access to welfare assistance. As part of these changes, mental health activists have found common cause with disabled people in the deprivation of welfare rights and they have forged new coalitions. Rose's article offers a powerful example of how activists have had to re-read their struggles for the 'peak neoliberal' context, vigilant to the risks of co-optation and even erasure.

This series of papers highlights that there are no easy assumptions about where justice lies, or whether practices such as community organising, participation and advocacy – the bread and butter of traditional community psychology – are emancipatory or not. Furthermore, tools of organising have been taken up by right-wing populist movements, and by state institutions. Ostensibly emancipatory concepts such as 'active citizenship', 'participation' or 'post-diagnosis' can be used to suppress and silence justice-focused activism, maintaining the dominance of powerful groups rather than redistributing power. The papers underline the need for community psychologists to remain vigilant about where power lies, who or what benefits from initiatives, and to question the route and direction of emancipatory action.

Despite the dangers of co-option, however, most papers in this special section recommend holding fast to the core of community psychology assumptions and values, rather than rejecting them. In some settings, particularly US settings, authors have observed a neoliberal 'drift' in community work, and call for a reaffirmation of community psychology's core principle of relationality, revitalising the relational nature of well-being, and the relationships that are at the heart of emancipatory organising.

Using several long-standing strategies of health justice activism, Nandi (2018, this section) documents the story of a struggle against the privatisation of health services in Chhattisgarh, India, showing the effective use of many of the traditional strategies of organising, including building alliances between civil society groups, bureaucrats, politicians and experts, holding press conferences, rallies and marches. Even with very strong forces for the 'liberalisation' of public services, Nandi demonstrates that traditional labour unions and connections to policy-makers are still routes to influence in India, particularly when mobilised by a 'relentless' commitment by activists and bombardment with multiple strategies.

Dutt and Kohfeldt (2018, this section) take inspiration from the practices of latinx youth involved in an activist art project in the United States and women in rural Nicaragua involved in feminist organising. Arguing that dominant

liberal political structures have for far too long failed marginalised groups such as women and people of colour, they look to the practices of such marginalised groups for alternative political forms, identifying a liberatory ethic of care as a productive alternative. The focus on care puts relationships and interdependence centre-stage. Dutt and Kohfeldt look back to the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) who wrote about an ethics of care primarily at an interpersonal level, and forward to the needs of the 21st century, where they suggest a politicized ethics of care could offer a transformative foundation to macro-level environmental and workers' struggles.

Resonating strongly with Dutt and Kohfeldt (2018, this section), Speer and Han (2018, this section), in their critique of what they characterise as a neoliberal capture of community organising, advocate a return to community psychology's roots in 'relational organising'. They seek to bolster an organising style which entails a gradual and labour-intensive process of building up collective power within a community, starting with conversations about priorities, and building sustainable structures and new leaders. They argue that new centres of power are required to tackle established power hierarchies, and the strongest potential resources that excluded communities have to underpin and drive a legitimate centre of power are their relationships and structures.

For these papers, the challenges and changes wrought by the individualisation of liberalism and neoliberalism do not discredit fundamental values and strategies of a community psychology tradition committed to relationality, but call for a reaffirmation of those long-standing values, even in the face of a hostile environment.

## New Disruptive Sources of Agency

A series of papers in this special section prompts us to reconsider the nature of activism itself, identifying new sources of disruptive agency in two areas: in grassroots communities and in the technologies which they might use. Two papers suggest that people and groups which transgress mainstream norms can be, by their very existence, disruptive, embodying a form of immanent activism.

For Fine, Torre, Frost, and Cabana (2018, this section), the impetus for resistance and change lies in the 'wilful subjectivities' of LGBT/Gender Expansive youth. The authors locate these in two dimensions. The first is in their 'refusal to straighten'. The second emancipatory impetus lies in the strategies they have developed to resist oppression in their personal relationships with educators, family and peers. These strategies include intimate activisms, such as delicately interrupting family members' exclusionary talk, offering care to each other, or the use of radical wit.

In their study of 'attention deficit disorder', Radiszcz and Sir (2018, this section) explore the idea that a phenomenon which is diagnosed as a 'symptom', an 'error' or a 'problem', instead of being seen as a problem, can be used as a prompt for critical thinking about the system that results in that problem definition. They suggest that children diagnosed with ADHD are disruptive, not of classrooms, but of social norms of attention that prioritise stillness and focus. They are also disruptive of a terrifyingly unequal economy, where parents believe that the lifeline for their children's survival is high attainment at school. Radiszcz and Sir advocate an 'intensification of error' in a way that transforms a 'disability' into a radical critique of society, and call for new partnerships between intellectuals, professionals and families to advance a militancy in this direction.

Starting with an 'inclusion/exclusion' dichotomy, liberal social justice efforts have often sought to bring about the 'inclusion' of minoritized groups. 'Assimilation' to the mainstream has of course widely been critiqued as a

colonising approach to difference, and these papers value *refusal* and *disruption* rather than assimilation, as responses respectful of the diversity and agency of minoritized groups. Excluded groups can resist domination by refusing integration, or rejecting offers of 'engagement' with public services (Montenegro, 2018a).

A further set of papers identifies sources of disruption in the mediated ways through which grassroots communities and activists communicate. Speer and Han (2018, this section) suggest that new media and big data have largely been used in ways that control and individualise populations, but that those technologies have potential to be developed as more relational ways of communicating and engaging with data.

This theme is taken up by Gonzalez-Polledo (2018, this section), whose paper is probably the most radical in its efforts to challenge community psychology's traditional location of agency within the actions of individuals and communities – viewed as locked into relationships through bonds of solidarity. Her work draws attention to the non-human sources of agency, in her framing of the agency of new technologies. She questions the teleology of community agency, using the concept of 'cosmopolitics', which suggests that technological politics are situated, multiple and unfinished, and can never be resolved in a single 'progress narrative' or universal logic. Digital worlds, she argues, decentre agency, opening new spaces for digital health activisms to foreground health experiences. From a cosmopolitical point of view, influencing powerful decision-makers and policies is only one option among many to change power relations. Communication technologies have power and produce social change. Communities of social media users making sense of health conditions have power to rethink health, whether health service reforms happen or not.

Finally, Pausé and Glover (2018, this section) and Barnes (2018, this section) illuminate how new and traditional media are not simply tools for the circulation and expansion of messages of social transformation. When activists use these spaces their messages are shaped, distorted and their causes simplified and used to reinforce prevailing narratives. While Barnes focuses on televised debates involving activists in South Africa, Pausé and Glover (2018, this section) use their own experiences as publicly engaged scholars in New Zealand to reflect on the risks and potentials of participating in 'debates' on social media platforms. Despite their own negative experiences of being discredited and silenced online, they call for scholars to arm themselves for 'sociable scholarship', rather than avoid it, given the enormous potential of the social media for peer-to-peer communication, raising awareness, building collaborations and communities.

These papers call us to pay much greater attention to the agency of the technologies of activism. The media through which community psychologists and activists communicate are a constitutive part of activism itself. The increased role of social media platforms in shaping public debate, and widespread discussion of their manipulation to bring about political change, demands that community psychology should take technology as a central object of enquiry, one which has been largely neglected to date.

## Problematising the 'Scholar-Activist' Role

Papers in this special section come with explicit political commitments. Their authors work in different kinds of partnerships with activists and minoritized groups, aiming for their knowledge production to contribute to emancipation and social justice. Some present positive case studies of such collaborations, while others reflect more on their challenges.

Dating back to the work of Paulo Freire, traditional community psychology has often placed great emphasis on alliances or partnerships between the excluded and more powerful actors or groups capable of assisting them in their fight for social justice (Aveling & Jovchelovitch, 2014). Yet in unequal societies, dominant groups generally control the media, the education system, and the funding and evaluation of research – in ways that often lead to the production of forms of knowledge that legitimise their dominant social status and undermine the claims of the excluded. In this particular special section, several authors refer to the production of knowledge about social groups as a key arena for activism, highlighting the role that alliances between activists and academics might play in generating knowledge that reflects the needs and interests of marginalised groups.

Locating himself within the growing tradition of 'evidence-based activism' (Rabeharisoa, Moreira, & Akrich, 2013), Walker et al. (2018, this section) point to knowledge-production as a key site of struggle. They reject the current NHS practice of shoehorning the scope of so-called public participation exercises into the knowledge frames of service providers, and the focus on topics relating to technical aspects of service provision rather than the wider politics of service-provision. Their case study of alternative engagement practices by an alliance of local health service users, radical academics and disaffected professionals outlines how they used 'Statactivism' as a pathway for knowledge democratisation. Statistics (widely used in service of controlling, managerial goals) formed the basis for a politics of knowledge disruption, highlighting a widespread public dissatisfaction with how services were commissioned and funded – which had been masked by the narrow frame of previous public consultations.

Fernández et al. (2018, this section) pursue knowledge democratisation through a different methodology, namely a participatory action research project bringing together faculty and women of colour student activists in a university context. They show how the participatory project supported the intersectional socio-political development of the student activists, and their wellbeing, through an ethics of care and support. The student activists were pursuing an intellectual project of developing critiques of a marginalising institutional order, and a political project of developing strategies and solidarities to challenge that marginalisation. Participants in this process were all scholar-activists, disrupting the idea of an 'insider' and 'outsider'. Student participants faced greater risks and challenges than a tenured faculty member, drawing attention to the value of individual and collective care and wellbeing in socio-political development. Activism depends upon the wellbeing of activists as well as on the achievement of their politicising actions.

Whilst the papers above see a positive role for scholar-activists in partnering with disadvantaged communities in ways that make communities and their members subjects rather than objects in the production of knowledge about them, several papers problematize the canonical role of 'scholar-activist' as a specific type of change agent.

Capri and Swartz (2018, this section) write in the devastating context of South Africa's Esidimeni crisis, where 140 people, mostly persons with intellectual disabilities (PWID), died after moving into completely inadequate 'community care' services following deinstitutionalisation. They consider the relationship between PWID and those without, posing a dilemma for would-be advocates without ID. Many of the people with whom they work need assistance with activities of daily living, and are excluded from citizenship or activist roles without assistance, so a liberal model of the concerned individual, expressing her or his independent voice does not work. Nor is inaction an option, in the context of the lethal deprivation of rights. But activists 'speaking for' PWID or 'giving voice' to PWID are themselves highly disabling actions, colonising potential space for PWID with the hegemonic views of non-disabled activists. Drawing on an 'ethics of care', and a vision of a 'care-interdependent' society which positively values giving and receiving care, Capri and Swartz put forward a model of 'voluntary-assisted advocacy'.

This model of advocacy is founded on relationships of trust and respect between PWID and non-disabled advocates. It prompts continual reflection on advocacy's purposes and power relations, in the service of PWID's social justice needs. Such a relationship, they suggest, serves to constitute PWID as citizens, and can be a foundation for broader social and political demands.

Based on his own engagement with a group of mental health service-user and non-user activists in Chile, Montenegro (2018b, this section) explores the complex situation of social researchers attempting to conduct research on activism in the mental health field. Service-user activism is premised on the priority of personal experience. This complicates the role of academically-oriented researchers who lack direct experience of mental health service use, but are drawn into this field, introducing specific tensions and ambiguities to the process of access, participation and exit from the field. Montenegro calls for reflexivity and humility on the part of researchers, arguing that openness to the challenges of academic-activist encounters offers rich rewards in mutual learning. The ways in which service user groups respond to researchers' interests and agendas throws light onto the emergent affinities and solidarities that shape this form of activism.

The discussion of the complexities of engagement between academics and activists resonates with a more general theme in the special section, namely the risks and limits of activism. Pausé and Glover (2018, this section), a Fat Studies scholar and a community psychologist working to prevent tobacco-related harms, consider themselves both scholars and activists. In their paper, they reflect upon the risks involved in this dual identity in the context of an impetus to 'sociable scholarship', that is, scholarship that engages in social media communication as a means of dissemination and of being held accountable to communities. They describe their very negative experiences of taking part in livestreamed 'debates' on their topics of expertise, where they felt treated as 'adversarial fodder', their arguments ridiculed and silenced in shows encouraging audience members to pick a side and comment, enabling *ad hominem* attacks and hate speech of the kind they intend their scholarship to tackle. While Pausé and Glover value the democratising potential of online communication, in these experiences, the technology stimulated aggressive, adversarial and discrediting interactions. They point out that for scholars, whose authority depends on claims of intellectual rigour, such discrediting of their expertise and intellectual contributions is particularly hurtful and damaging.

Finally, Kronick, Cleveland, and Rousseau (2018, this section) reflect on the excruciating dilemmas they faced as clinician-researchers engaging with migrant families in immigration detention in Canada. Their research project about mental health in immigration detention centres was closely controlled and policed by the prison authorities. When they sought to act as clinicians, writing a psychiatric report on the deteriorating health of a child to be used by the child's lawyer, their continued research access was threatened. Thus they had to perform an impossible weighing of their commitment as scholars generating research on the effects of an abusive system, and their commitment as clinicians who should do the best for patients. Like Montenegro, they treat their experience of the research as a source of information on the topic of study, learning about the absolute power enacted in contemporary 'total institutions' such as prisons or detention centres, and the emotional effects of being on the receiving end of that power. They do not claim to have an answer to the problem of 'dual loyalties', but invite further and continual reflection by clinician-researchers or scholar-activists on such difficult balancing acts.

Collectively, these papers problematise a traditional view of the 'scholar-activist' as a collaborative external change agent who, regardless of frictions, is able to build egalitarian relationships with communities and activists while retaining the academic dimension of their role (Campbell & Murray, 2004). Community psychologists have always

rejected 'speaking for' communities, often advocating 'listening to', or 'amplifying voices' (Fernández et al., 2018, this section; Fine et al., 2018, this section; Walker et al., 2018, this section). But relationships with communities and activists are often asymmetrical and complex. To deal with this asymmetry, Capri and Swartz (2018, this section) in their model of 'voluntary-assisted advocacy', propose 'speaking with' as an option. In the context of repressive total institutions, Kronick et al. (2018, this section) ask scholars to acknowledge the dilemmas when they are called to self-silence in relation to immediate injustices so that they may be allowed to continue to produce their research. Finally, those groups that have been at the receiving end of interventions – and research – have increasingly constituted themselves as hybrid activist-researchers, creating new knowledge and radically problematising the role and validity of the external 'scholar-activist' (Fernández et al., 2018, this section; Montenegro, 2018b, this section; Rose, 2018, this section).

## Keeping Alive a Politics of Hope

Whilst complex contemporary social and political scenarios frequently lead to a sense of deep despair amongst many on the left (Campbell, 2014), several of our authors call for a more hopeful approach, echoing both long-standing (Freire, 1992/2014) and recent (Jensen, 2014; Solnit, 2017) calls for optimism. Leaders of this trend in our particular special section are Fine et al. (2018, this section), in their emphasis on 'positive marginality'. They argue that despite the extreme nature of current collective threats to well-being in the US, the wilful subjectivities of LGBTQ/GE youth – one of the most extremely oppressed group in the country – are cause for celebration. They point to the confidence and solidarity of many members of this group, often viciously exiled from home, school, state protection and community in an atmosphere of hate and violence, and emphasise the ambiguous effects of violent misrecognition in this group. Real and symbolic violence against them have indeed led to severely compromised mental and physical health, and high levels of suicidal thinking. Yet their findings highlight how these impacts are buffered by various forms of explicit and implicit activism. Disproportionately high levels of activism by this group, not only challenging their sexual oppression, but also their involvement in other social struggles around prisons, policing, and immigration, have led not only to the possibility of social change, but also to positive individual health benefits. Resonating strongly with this account, Fernández et al. (2018, this section) celebrate the achievements of young people of colour in securing advances in racial equality in the USA, from the civil rights movement, to activism to put race on the agenda in universities, and most recently to movements such as Black Lives Matter and the DREAMers. They document the power of a participatory action research process for both young women's socio-political development and their individual and collective wellbeing.

Other authors who call for greater optimism include Walker et al. (2018, this section) who conclude their study of 'alternative engagement practices' against undemocratic so-called 'public participation' exercises by the UK NHS by urging readers not to forget that 'engagement is possible'. They urge us not to ignore opportunities for citizens to insist on dialogue between themselves and the institutions that represent them, to achieve a critical engagement between top-down accountability by service providers and bottom-up influence by service users.

Somewhat paradoxically, the very destructiveness of impoverishing and individualising economic and social policies provides a productive impetus to action. As Rose (2018, this section) claims, an economic climate of austerity in the UK brought together disability activists and mental health activists under a common cause. Nandi (2018, this section) claims that the campaign against privatisation of healthcare in Chhattisgarh worked because

in India campaigning against privatisation and neoliberal policies was a broad enough rallying cry to bring together a wide coalition of different people and groups who could unite behind the cause.

# Conclusion

This special section is an attempt to 'think with activism', using authors' accounts of contemporary activism to promote insights into the nature of current social relations, and into the possibilities and constraints for activism that those social relations entail. In what has often seemed a bewilderingly hostile socio-political environment, we have looked to the practice of activism for insights into potential ways forward for community psychology. In what follows, we first address the question of the nature of current conditions, and then what we have learned of the prospects for an emancipatory community psychology.

The papers collected here outline dangerous times for marginalised communities and difficult times for social justice activism. They position themselves against a backdrop of a liberal and neoliberal hegemony. The landscape of activism has been shaped by the doctrine of liberalism, with its visions of the autonomous individual on a level playing field, and a neoliberal set of social and economic policies that presuppose the inevitability of competitive individualism and individual responsibility. Liberalism, as these papers argue, has individualised community mobilising and community psychology, depoliticized seemingly progressive ideas like citizen participation, representative democracy, or meritocracy, and has crushed the imagination of alternatives by presenting the status quo as the only or natural option. New communication technologies, which promised a democratisation of communication, have often been turned to instruments of control, profit, or sensationalism. Economic shifts, such as the welfare cuts associated with austerity, or rising economic inequality, create new vulnerabilities, forcing activists to rethink the threats they face and coalitions they might forge.

However, the papers' response is not one of despair. Instead, there is a sense of urgency in response to lethal austerity policies, and violently toxic environments for sexual and racial minorities. Such urgency also accompanies these papers' calls for vigilance in response to the co-option of core community psychology values and practices. Community psychology has long battled with risks of depoliticization (Campbell & Murray, 2004), with feel-good buzzwords such as 'participation' and 'empowerment' all too easily driving attention to the actions of individuals and communities rather than to structural power relations. These papers offer a renewed sense of the urgency of radical transformative efforts, politicising their analyses with reference to the socio-political environment, and refusing to shy away from the contentious and conflictual politics that are likely to be required for such transformation. It is possible that the urgency of responding to the violence of 'peak neoliberalism' could energise and reinvigorate a critical community psychology that refuses to be silent or complacent about unequal power relations.

For these authors, the hostile socio-political environment does not refute the core commitments of community psychology or make them outdated. Rather, across their examples of activism and scholar-activism, they make the case that the core community psychology commitment to relationality is made all the more urgent by the prevailing individualist and competitive hegemony. Community psychology has a rich history of transformative theory and practice, which articulates an alternative to that hegemony. The sense of urgency and responsibility to enact that alternative is another source for the reinvigoration of community psychology (Fine, 2016).

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Beyond reaffirming established commitments, the collection of papers also identify novel and complex sources of agency being employed by activists, encouraging community psychologists to look for, and to establish, resistance where repressive systems discriminate or pathologise. 'Intimate activisms' or 'intensification of error' might not accord with traditional community psychology visions of organised collective action in service of a social justice goal, but offer valuable social change potentials. Technologically mediated communication also offers potentially transformative agency, but in a risky and ambiguous way. Digital communication both centralises data in the interest of control, and decentres agency in distributed peer-to-peer support networks. Social media offer opportunities for building collectivities around social justice goals, but just as many opportunities for malicious and discrediting hate speech. As with the co-option of community psychology concepts, labels of 'participation' or 'peer-to-peer' are no guarantees of transformative potential, but require careful interrogation. These are examples of the complexities of 'progressive' ideals in the contemporary context, again underlining the need for vigilance.

In this special section, the role of scholar-activists, or external change agents, is also made complex and problematic. Authors are acutely attuned to the positionality of scholars or scholar-activists, in their relationships with activists and communities. The researcher does not appear as an abstract liberal individual seeking knowledge for its own sake, or as a well-intentioned knowledgeable 'outsider' bringing useful perspectives to a marginalised groups, but as an occupant of a social position, an interest group, and an identity. Authors call for very careful reflection on the relation between the scholar-activist and her community/activist interlocutors and collaborators, because in those relationships, participants can be constituted as citizens, as creative activists, as critical intellectuals, or as service users or objects of study. While community psychologists have argued this position previously, the backdrop of the hegemony of liberal individualism seems to make this reflection on ethical and political complexities all the more pressing.
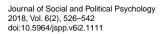
In sum, the 'peak neoliberal' environment in some ways serves to clarify and motivate the transformative commitments of community psychology to working towards health and social justice in collaboration with marginalised communities. The relational core of community psychology becomes an increasingly urgent alternative as the damage of competitive individualism accrues. We had questioned whether community psychology's optimistic vision had been outdated by rapidly changing events, but instead, through the creativity of the activists and authors represented in this special section, find a community psychology re-energised and re-invigorated. The hostility of the environment suggests that the community psychology required for this era is unlikely to be a consensus-seeking, accommodationist endeavour, but a contentious and combative scholar-activism. This special section presents a snapshot, at the early stage of responses to our changing times. We expect that community psychology's concepts and tools will evolve further as scholar-activists get to grips with the challenges and potentials of these times. We hope that this special section both reinforces the value of community psychology's original relational commitments and offers provocations and inspirations for new practices, collaborations and thinking that will be needed as community psychology is reinvigorated for a new era.

## Funding

## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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## Acknowledgments

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