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Towards a Liberatory Ethics of Care Framework for Organizing Social Change

Anjali Dutt*[a], Danielle Kohfeldt[b]

[a] Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA. **[b]** Department of Psychology, College of Liberal Arts, California State University, Long Beach, CA, USA.

Abstract

Community psychology originated as a discipline designed to reduce societal inequities and promote social justice. The field's development, however, coincides with the proliferation of neoliberal policies and ideology that run counter to many of the aims of community psychology. In light of the contemporary socio-political landscape, this paper advances a liberatory ethics of care model as a path forward for community psychologists interested in societal transformation. We illustrate liberatory care as a guide for social change via case studies of two different groups involved in transformation-oriented projects to improve the well-being of their communities (i.e., Latinx youth in the United States involved in an activist art project and women in rural Nicaragua involved in feminist organizing). We specifically illustrate that an ethics of care framework both guides the actions of these groups, and offers an alternative focus for community psychologists interested in promoting transformation towards more healthful and just societies. We aim to contribute to efforts to promote justice-oriented change by explicating the role of care-oriented communal values in promoting liberatory practices.

Keywords: ethics of care, social justice, qualitative research

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*Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Cincinnati, PO Box 210376 Cincinnati, OH 45219-0376, USA. Phone: (513)556-5516. E-mail: Duttal@ucmail.uc.edu

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Community psychology originated as a discipline designed to reduce societal inequities and promote social justice. The field's development, however, coincides with the proliferation of neoliberal policies and ideology that run counter to many of the aims of community psychology. Where community psychology emphasizes social change to enhance the wellbeing of marginalized groups, neoliberalism encourages limited interference in the existing social order, privatization of social goods, and a focus on self-improvement rather than collective liberation. Moreover, a consequence of the neoliberal era is the exacerbated socioeconomic inequality both within and between countries. Consequently, although the activist heart of community psychology has long been at odds with prevailing social practices and value systems (often those stemming from the United States), we currently find ourselves at

a point where the intellectual and empirical tools at our disposal are insufficient given the grave inequities surrounding us.

In light of the contemporary socio-political landscape, this paper advances a liberatory ethics of care as a path forward for community psychologists interested in liberatory transformation. A focus on ethics of care involves foregrounding human interdependence and shared responsibility to one another as essential processes in creating community change. Additionally, this paper implores us to ask what outcomes we desire in seeking more just realities, and encourages interrogation of the value frameworks utilized to achieve these goals. Moreover, our analysis of care ethics in propagating more liberatory environments responds to calls to move away from research narratives focused on damaged realities, and instead contributes to building a legacy of thoughtful and impactful strategies employed by marginalized communities to create meaningful change (Langhout, 2016; Tuck, 2009). In what follows, we discuss the origins and implications of dominant approaches to structuring communities and societies, and contrast this with approaches grounded in a liberatory ethics of care. We then more fully explicate the ecology of liberatory care ethics, with each theoretical tenet accompanied by examples from our work that demonstrate the enactment of care ethics among Latinx youth in the United States and women living in rural Nicaragua, all involved in efforts to contribute to just social change. These examples are intended to serve as sketches from the field to illustrate the concepts as well as the utility of ethics of care as a conceptual tool for understanding the nature of community-grounded justice efforts. The ultimate aim of this paper is to elucidate the transformative possibilities that exist when community psychologists and activists ground their efforts to promote change in liberatory care.

Liberalism, Neoliberalism and Their Influences on Contemporary Society

Scholars across disciplines have demarcated the previous several decades as the era of neoliberalism, noting that neoliberal policies and ideologies have become the dominant, often imposed, blueprint utilized to structure political change (Parker, 2014; Sastry & Dutta, 2013). Although neoliberalism and its philosophical predecessor liberalism are regularly mentioned in political critique and discourse, this often occurs in an acontextual manner in which the historical meanings are diluted, potentially hindering goals to seek more transformative and just alternatives (Harvey, 2007). In the broadest sense liberalism is associated with individual freedoms and protections. Many connect the promotion of liberal thought and policy to historical events including the English Civil Wars, the American and French Revolutions, and the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and later Adam Smith (Ball, Minogue, Girvetz, & Dagger, 2017). These events and connected philosophies mark periods of rapid social change directed towards freeing individual citizens from the political and financial chains of monarchs and aristocracy, albeit importantly the individual citizens of focus were overwhelmingly white men. As theories of liberalism have evolved and diverged, significant additions include arguments to remove barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and inequitable access to healthcare and education that prevent individuals from living freely (Ball et al., 2017). However, as in neoliberalism, many continue to view the reduction of any governmental influence beyond the protection of individual rights as the ultimate goal of modern governments (Harvey, 2007). It can be viewed as paradoxical that methods to promote freedom via neoliberal tactics can manifest in widespread disenfranchisement due to the social, rather than legal, barriers that are created or bolstered. Indeed, the vary barriers liberals argue must be removed to promote freedom arise in connection to neoliberal policies (Harvey, 2007; Parker,

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2014). Nevertheless, a primary focus on the individual rather than the relational, interconnected realities of human existence remain unifying links in both liberal and neoliberal narratives.

The concept of neoliberalism is derived from classic liberal economic theory, which argues for the elimination of barriers to trade and a belief in the efficiency of markets without governmental interference as a path to prosperity (Harvey, 2007). The prefix 'neo' refers to the reemergence and renewed implementation of this economic policy beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s, largely stemming from the United States. What began as an economic policy influenced by specific manifestations of liberal thought has grown into widespread ideology (Nafstad et al., 2007; Sastry & Dutta, 2013; Spivak & Sharp, 2008). The economic growth, largely experienced by those with preexisting power, that was associated with neoliberal economic policy incentivized decision makers in several sectors to make use of similar logic to rethink and restructure various aspects of society. For example, researchers have connected cuts to public spending on health care in the US, UK and Australia with neoliberal arguments stating that private markets are more cost-effective and efficient (McGregor, 2001). Similarly, neoliberal ideology in education casts students as potential profit makers, leading to a de-emphasis of civic values in education and increased focus on standardized testing (Connell, 2013; Parker, 2014). Perhaps ironically, despite the political left's frequent condemnation of anything associated with neoliberalism, Western societies' grounding in liberal individualism contributes to the proliferation of neoliberal values.

In recent years, exacerbated economic disparity has increased frustration with the existing configuration of the political order. The growth of both nationalist movements in the United States and Europe, and anti-capitalist movements globally can all be understood as increasingly audible actions calling for political change. In this sense, the neo/liberal logics that have created the contemporary socio-political and economic status quo have been recognized as insufficient and unjust. However, the recent rise of neoliberal nationalism in the West also casts light on the deceptive narrative of individualism in neo/liberalism (Harmes, 2012). For example, in psychology the notion of the independent self, affiliated with the West, stems from liberal individualism intertwined with colonial and neoliberal quests for domination (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017). The establishment of the contemporary political order thus has not come about solely through the efforts of powerful, independently minded individuals. Rather, colonial and neoliberal practices establish a protective order for communities with preexisting power (e.g., white elites), in part through the myth of individualism. Similarly, the liberal independence used to define Western societies overlooks the lived experience and worldviews of women, people of color, and other groups with less sociopolitical power (Markus, 2017). Moreover, these groups historically and persistently have been tasked with more caregiving labor, both creating vantage points more attuned to the necessity of care and ideal voices to prioritize in theorizing equitable social transformation (Fine, 2007; Kurtiş & Adams, 2015). Indeed, efforts to create "a more equitable world requires cultivation of mentalities [more honestly] attuned to the interdependence of everyday life" (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017, p. 37), and more interested in the wellbeing of the broader community.

Recent pushes for political change including the rise of nationalist, populist leaders in the U.S. and Brexit in the U.K. demonstrate alarming consequences associated with the accumulation of power at a global level (Dutt, 2018a). The individualist narratives that bolster Western economic dominance (and particularly that of the U.S.) continue to allow for an intensification of the destructive patterns that prioritize voices, concerns, and experiences of those with more preexisting power. Importantly, these tactics illuminate a collectivist orientation towards preserving the white, male, and Western hegemonic status quo. In discerning a path towards more transformative social change we urge researchers to focus on the values and strategies that have been expounded by those

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who have long been underserved by existing political structures (e.g., women and people of color), who thus have been required to develop grassroots activism to ensure care for their community. More specifically, we call for a focus on a liberatory ethics of care as a prioritized theoretical framework in seeking transformative and socially just change.

Promoting a Liberatory Ethics of Care

Carol Gilligan (1982) conceptualized ethics of care as a moral orientation that focuses on maintaining relationships, responding to the needs of others, and a responsibility not to cause harm. During the 1980s and early 1990s much of the theorizing around ethics of care centered upon situating work that was typically gendered as feminine (e.g., taking care of children; tending to those who are aging or ill) as philosophically and morally rigorous and arduous, and deserving of greater societal valuing and compensation (Fine & Glendinning, 2005). Although Gilligan's work has been critiqued for its emphasis on gender differences that have not been empirically substantiated (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000), in recent years scholars outside of psychology have asserted that an ethics of care orientation is helpful for promoting more healthful and equitable societies (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). For example, theorists suggest that addressing social issues related to environmental stewardship and worker protections, might be more adequate if approached from an ethics of care, rather than solely a liberal, rights-based orientation (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Robinson, 2006). As such, scholars have begun to discuss the need for a *politicized* ethics of care to ensure that these values are reflected in social institutions and the culture at large (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Sevenhuijsen, 2003; Tronto, 1995).

Perhaps one reason ethics of care discourses have not been more prominent in work to promote social justice is that such relationally oriented values are in stark contrast to more prominent liberal discourses. Indeed, an ethics of care "calls on us to *take* responsibility, while liberal individualist morality focuses on how we should leave each other alone" (Held, 2006, p. 14-15). Furthermore, much of the most transformation-oriented theorizing around care ethics stems from members of communities who have been particularly underserved by the existing political order, namely Black women, whose theorizing calls into question individualistic myths in strategies for wellbeing (Thompson, 1998). For example, both Patricia Hill Collins (2005) and bell hooks (1984) have discussed the centrality of communality in Black women's lived experience, evidenced in practices such as othermothering. The experience of caring for children, or being cared for by women, who are not biologically/legally related cultivates a deeply ingrained sense of interdependence and collective responsibility to others in the community that subverts individualistic narratives about the nuclear family. Interestingly, despite the reality that wealthy families have long hired nannies (largely women of color) to care for their children, which could also disrupt romanticism of the nuclear family, the attached narrative is more frequently associated with neoliberal idealization about opportunities that arise through wealth. Similarly, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1994) illustrates the creative strategizing Black women employ in community work that necessitates an understanding of herself as powerful because of her knowledge on interdependence and capability of challenging structures and practices that disadvantage her community. This notion of the self as powerful is similar to narratives about the self in liberal individualism, however in Gilkes's analysis women use their individual power to affirm their own self-worth for liberatory aims. Moreover, by asserting that care ethics must center the dismantling of systemic power inequities that acutely impact people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, poor, and disabled communities, Black women theorists unveil practices that transcend the individual/collective divide and push us towards envisioning an ethics of care that begets justice.

Uniting calls for a politicized ethic of care and Black feminist theorizing on care with liberation psychology further enhances our ability to identify an ethics of care that promotes transformation. Liberation psychology is an approach to psychology that aims to understand the experiences of oppressed communities by actively identifying and addressing the sociopolitical structures that contribute to oppression. A leader in this approach, Maritza Montero (2007) identifies de-ideologization and de-alienation as two processes involved in promoting liberatory environments and experiences. These interwoven processes involve developing an understanding that individual experience is shaped by socio-political structure, and that there is thus an inherent interconnectivity uniting lived realities. Acknowledging this connected experience urges concern for the collective and caregiving action to address identified sources of inequity. In many societies, caregiving is regularly conceptualized and experienced as a burden, in large part because the inequitable distribution and inadequate compensation of caregiving labor imposes undue burden to those tasked with this work. However, through de-ideologizing and de-alienating practices care is no longer relegated as a sole concern of families and intimate circles. Rather, care becomes a lens of concern for the community and broader society. Fostering care oriented environments and structures can thus alleviate the individual burden of care, while simultaneously propagating justice, wellbeing and a sustained sense of solidarity. Building upon calls for a politicized ethics of care, a liberatory ethics of care encourages both integration of care values at the structural and policy level, and necessitates prioritization of voices and perspectives that have been underacknowledged and underserved in the existing sociopolitical order. In this sense, a focus on care begets and maintains iterative movement towards collective liberation.

This vision of liberatory care builds upon processes identified by feminist psychologists working collaboratively with marginalized communities and suggests links between care and justice. For example, several scholars have noted the role of involvement in consciousness raising communities as catalyzing understanding of connections between the personal and political, and consequent interest in work to promote social justice (Dutt & Grabe, 2017; Moane, 2006). That the foundation for interest in promoting more equitable distribution of wealth, services, and opportunity is linked to involvement in community spaces where care work likely occurs is both important and not surprising. Additionally, researchers have documented connections between economic-inequity driven migration and the negligence of social justice and care, namely that individuals from the Global South are regularly forced to take on care-giving labor in the North, rendering substantial unmet care needs in their home communities (Kofman & Raghuram, 2006). Care and justice are inherently interconnected, and only through their united focus can we begin to adequately create more healthful, equitable, and compassionate societies.

Collectively, the reviewed works bring to focus two false dichotomies associated with theorizing on care: (a) the individual/collective divide, and (b) the notion that care and justice can be separated from one another. Collectively oriented care tactics have long been utilized to maintain the hegemony of elite groups, and care for the self is essential for both realizing self -worth and having the sustained capacity to contribute to community improvement. Thus, although care has been used to impede justice, care processes have also always been essential, albeit often overlooked, elements for fostering social justice. Table 1 illustrates different examples of ways care has been utilized for individuals and collectives, for both justice attenuating and promoting means. Given the complex possibilities that arise through a focus on care, we focus the remainder of our paper on processes to promote liberatory care.

Table 1

Example Manifestations of Care Ethics That Either Maintain or Challenge Inequity

Manifestation of care	Care for the Individual	Care for the Collective
Care that maintains inequitable status quo	• Individual hoarding of Wealth • Self-care that neglects how other's might be harmed in the process	• Corporate Welfare • Political and corporate nepotism
Care for equitable social transformation	• Self-care that centers on substantiating self-worth • Bonding with others who have shared experience	• Organizing to address inequities that inhibit the health and wellbeing of communities • Paid parental/family leave in the workplace

In the next section of the paper we draw on secondary data from two case studies of community-based, action-oriented research projects to examine how liberatory care shapes the actions and goals of two collectives involved in efforts to improve community wellbeing. The Mural Arts Program endeavored to build collective identity and solidarity to combat social exclusion. The feminist organizing in Nicaragua through *Xochilt Acalt* aimed to address gendered inequities throughout the community through various solidarity-oriented strategies. Both focused on promoting well-being and transformative change in marginalized communities and conceptualized a theory of change founded upon a liberatory ethics of care. Our motivation for the inclusion of these projects is the critique that narratives of care have been used to justify colonial practices without consideration of local definitions of care (Narayan, 1995). Thus, we aim to contribute to building an understanding of social change driven through care ethics by foregrounding the voices and actions of communities more regularly portrayed as recipients of care and liberation: Latinx youth in the United States involved in an activist art project and women in rural Nicaragua involved in feminist organizing. Simultaneously, the goal of highlighting the liberatory care approaches that undergird the perspectives and actions of these two groups is not to suggest that marginalized groups should be responsible for enacting or upholding caring practices in communities. Rather, the goal is to illuminate and amplify the insights and skills honed within communities who have had little choice but to seek their own realization of care-oriented priorities.

In the following section we turn to two case study examples to illustrate the role a liberatory ethics of care can play in promoting justice-oriented community change. Note that the projects presented in this paper are offered as a vehicle for more thoroughly grounding our theoretical propositions in an effort to provoke further discussion of liberatory care ethics. In contrast to a conventional empirical research paper, our aim is not to prove, but rather to illustrate, enactments of liberatory care to aid researchers in imagining how these concepts might manifest within diverse applied care settings. We believe that synthesizing the outcomes of two settings, disparate in their geographies and social locations, allows greater insight into the diverse contexts that generate liberatory care ethics, as well as the possibility for an ethics of care framework to cross borders, age, nationality, and other socially constructed differences. Simultaneously, both groups of participants are socioculturally constructed as dependent in their own localities (children and women). Those most impacted by injustices seem also to be most active in employing care perspectives to inform their activism (Fine, 2007). Therefore, in this paper we foreground the perspectives of two groups particularly impacted by inequities in their given contexts.

The case studies highlighted in this paper have been the source of multiple empirical research publications by both authors. We conceptualize the current paper as a comparative case study (Yin, 2003), and proceed in the vein as other social-community psychologists who seek to construct deeper understandings of community-based

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projects to inform future work (e.g., Campbell & Cornish, 2010; Cornish & Campbell, 2009; Cornish, Shukla, & Banerji, 2010).

The Mural Arts Youth Program

The Mural Arts Youth Program was a public elementary school-based youth participatory action research (yPAR) project. The program intended to create an empowering setting to facilitate critical inquiry and youth-directed social change (Kohfeldt & Langhout, 2012). The school hosting the program is located in the central coastal region of California, and serves primarily low-income and Latinx students. The yPAR program met weekly for one hour per week during the academic year, and four days per week for four hours each day over five weeks during the summer. The program was facilitated by two graduate students, eight undergraduate research assistants, and an associate professor from a local university.

Based on their research, 4th and 5th grade youth researcher-participants identified a number of interlacing problems within their school community, including a lack of a sense of belonging due in part to a dearth of value or respect for their culture, values, and families at the school. Values and beliefs are upheld in part through narrative discourses (Rappaport, 1995). During the 2011-2012 cycle of the yPAR program, 21 youth researchers held small group meetings with various community stakeholders (e.g., peers, parents, teachers, neighbors) to gather stories about experiences with power and/or lack of power in their community. Stories served as the basis for a large, publicly visible mural on an external wall of their elementary school. Community-based, participatory, social-justice oriented art is one strategy psychologists and activists use to create alternative narratives that work toward changing the values, beliefs and norms that underlie systems (Thomas & Rappaport, 1996). Thus, the mural served as a means of reflecting back to the community their own diverse strengths, struggles, and experiences in order to assert a counter-narrative more aligned with the lived experiences of actual community members. Interviews with Latinx youth were conducted by Danielle as part of a larger project on children's involvement in activist art-making processes (for more information on this project see Kohfeldt, Bowen, & Langhout, 2016).

Feminist Organizing Through Xochilt Acalt

El Centro por Mujeres Xochilt Acalt (The Xochilt Acalt Women's Center) emerged out of a women's movement in Nicaragua as an effort to address women's rights violations in the rural sector. The center formed shortly after a conservative shift in presidential power in 1990 introduced several neoliberal structural adjustment policies that yielded severe cutbacks to public sector commitments. These policies were associated with weakening the already precarious governmental support for women's rights. Consequently, within this context of decreasing social support from the national government, Xochilt Acalt was founded by a self-mobilized group of women in 1992, specifically to address high levels of ovarian cancer in the remote area in which they lived. Over the past two decades, the organization has expanded to address additional problems and demands from women that were arising within the community including: lack of food, illiteracy, lack of resources for family planning, high levels of gender-based violence, high rates of male migration for work, and a need to improve unequal power relations between women and men. This expansion reflects the capacity for a grassroots organization to evolve and improvise, transforming to reflect the needs and desires of the community where they operate.

The interviews with Nicaraguan women were conducted by Anjali as part of a larger, mixed-methods study on feminist community change (for more information on the context, primary research questions, and participants in this project see Dutt, 2018b). All interviews were administered in Spanish via simultaneous translation with the aid of a bi-cultural female interpreter from Nicaragua, and occurred privately in women's homes. The interviews focused on women's experiences, opinions, and efforts to create change in their own lives and their community.

Case Studies of Liberatory Care

In both case studies we explored our interviewee's reflections on their participation in the respective projects. We placed an emphasis on identifying patterns reflecting a liberatory ethics of care in how the Latinx youth and Nicaraguan women constructed their identities, values, and visions for their respective communities. Although in each set of interviews a number of themes were identified and refined, for this paper we focused upon themes related to embodying liberatory care ethics in efforts to promote change, at four different ecological levels of analysis: (a) the self (b) the interpersonal, including family, peers, and other smaller networks, (c) the community, including neighbors, school, social identity groups, and geographically bound groups, and (d) structural change, including desires or efforts to create change to institutions, policies, and/or dominant cultural narratives. By focusing on four levels, rather than just the individual and the collective, we add more nuance to traditional dichotomy, showcasing more complexity in care-oriented strategizing for change. With an interest in optimizing space for analysis we provide one exemplar of change-related effort at each level.

Liberatory Self-Care

In our analysis of care ethics, self-care may either maintain inequitable systems or disrupt those systems through substantiating self-worth and building connection to similarly situated others. Informed by neoliberal ideologies, self-care manifests in performative acts of (often feminized) consumption in the name of pampering and individual indulgence – purchasing a massage, an expensive meal. In this formulation, self-care entails a hyper-focus on the self at the expense of the wellbeing of others (e.g., often the underpaid labor of poor women and immigrants). In terms of social justice aims, an additional outcome of this form of self-care may be attempts to alleviate the consequences of oppression (e.g., stress, discomfort, guilt) through palliating the individual, thereby directing attention away from collective organizing.

Alternatively, the notion of self-care as developed by marginalized groups – namely black, queer, and feminist communities – conceptualized attending to one's own wellbeing as an act of defiance and resistance to oppressive systems that dictate whose lives are worthy of care (Lorde, 1988). Self-care can be viewed as a political act and a critique of the inordinate burden of care labor apportioned to women of color in family and community contexts, as well as an act of defiance in the face of dominant cultural narratives that demean and devalue. Additionally, although self-care that advances socially just transformation is conceptualized at the individual level of analysis, it is not individualistic. Liberatory self-care is enacted in and with community. As Sarah Ahmed (2014) writes, "in directing our care towards ourselves …we are not caring for those we are supposed to care for… And that is why in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community" (para. 35).

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Both communities echo this sentiment in their own conceptualizations of the self in relation to their social change work. For example, Layla, a Latinx youth illustrates how she cultivated a sense of confidence and self-esteem through her connection to the community:

> "My role in the program was helping the community get closer…I think it was also something that all of us created, you know I think my role was just, helping…get the stories from the community, being part of it, being a part of the community…the program helped me get through things, because I mean in the fourth grade I didn't believe in myself as much to run for secretary and president…I had really low self-esteem so I thought you know like, if [participating in the program] helped me, why can't I help others, and reach out to them?"

It is noteworthy that building self-esteem and self-confidence were not explicit purposes of the participatory research program in which Layla participated. Yet, she attributes this capacity building to her participation in community-based change efforts. In her estimation, the self-esteem and confidence translated into her running for (and obtaining) formal leadership positions within her school council. Moreover, she conceptualized this self-work in terms of its potential reverberations out into the community, as she considers how she may in turn help others who may need similar kinds of support. Self-care is realized when social support structures are available to allow one the resources to focus on individual capacity building. Thus, Layla's experience mirrors Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1994) research illustrating how women use their individual power to affirm their own self-worth for liberatory aims.

Interpersonal Liberatory Care

It is likely unsurprising to come across evidence of Latinx youth and women in Nicaragua expressing care for their loved ones and peers. Additionally, some might argue that the interpersonal domain is where caregiving belongs, and thus a focus on care in this context does little to disrupt traditional beliefs about care. Our interviews, however, were filled with examples of ways in which participants' depth of understanding about the necessity of care resulted in an internalized understanding of the self as one inherently connected to others, who fosters wellbeing and justice through interpersonal caring relations. This diverges from dominant views on caregiving as a paternalistic practice in which compassionate or obligated people may engage. Rather, because the self is always connected to others, care is an essential practice in expressing full humanity and building capacity for justice. In both interview sets, efforts to help those who were closest to them extended beyond traditional notions of charitable caregiving, and incorporated a focus on addressing inequities to promote a more sustainably caring and just environment. In Nicaragua, this was often evident in values that women intentionally taught their children, which involved efforts to disrupt the status quo regarding women's treatment. For example, Julia shared:

> "With my son, I tell him he has to respect women's rights a lot. That he cannot offend them in any way. Because, you are the son of a woman. You have to respect women. To my daughter I say, she has to gain respect and value herself as a woman. That she can't take into account what men say, rather she has to say that she has rights as a woman."

Julia's explanation of what she discusses with her children demonstrates an understanding of self as connected to others, and the importance of acknowledging relational realities in dialog for change with younger generations. Transmitting values to one's children, and showing concern about their experiences are important but not under-acknowledged aspects of parental care. They also are not particularly surprising statements to encounter from a member of a feminist group. However, the power of the statement rests in identifying the relational understanding of human reality entrenched in her advice. The values Julia conveys illuminate aspects of a liberatory ethics of

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care by articulating the reality that people are always connected to others, and thus the ways in which our actions affect others should play a critical role in influencing our beliefs and behaviors (Held, 2006). Further, they showcase knowledge about caring relations that are cultivated from the margins (bell hooks, 1984). Julia is aware from her own lived experience that gendered inequities will shape her children's lives. In seeking to create a world that is better for all people, she shares wisdom with her children aimed towards subverting the inequitable narratives her children undoubtedly encounter.

Collectively, the insights gained from care expressed by both the women in Nicaragua, as well as the Latinx youth who regularly discussed the desire to help others, contributes to building a framework for conceptualizing liberatory care at the interpersonal level. Conventional understandings of parental caregiving and altruism are transcended, emphasizing an ethic of care that engenders solidarity over conventional power relations. Altruism and traditional parental caregiving are often about an individual with more access to power helping those with less, underemphasizing the agency of those afforded less access to power, and overlooking the complexity of relational exchange that occurs in interpersonal relationships. The interviewees, however, weave an understanding that our destinies are intertwined, and caring relations are part of a process to sustain wellbeing. Thus it is not selflessness, nor is it solely for personal benefit; rather, it begets solidarity. A liberatory ethics of care does not bifurcate the interests of the individual with the common interests of collectives (Held, 2006). Instead, it recognizes that they overlap. Seeds of liberation are planted through acknowledged interdependence that obligates collective care.

Liberatory Care for the Community

Ethics of care at the community level involves expressing care in change strategies and activities that impact neighbors, school, social identity groups, and geographically bound groups. This manifested among interviewees in both groups via a commitment to subvert alienating systems and experiences. For example, the Latinx youth stressed that a goal of their community-based activism was to provide social support to overcome individualistic narratives and alienation. Carmen explains that a mural she and her co-creators painted at their elementary school reminds the people in her community that the experience of struggle is ubiquitous:

> "It [the mural] could help them, with their life, I guess, if they have, if they're going through a tough time, it could really help them. Let's say they think their life is worth nothing…well, everybody's been through something at least and so it's, they have their own history."

Overcoming individualism and alienation demands a recognition of shared inequities, which is necessary for attributing the source of social problems within structures rather than individuals. Thus, the social action these young people undertook (i.e., a public mural) enhances a sense of ownership and belonging within the community. As another youth, Lilianna, asserts, "the mural, it shows how you can change the perspective of things…it makes you see the perspective of others...do they have people to love them? Do you think everyone feels peace in the world?" In turn, their activism also builds collective concern, empathy, and commitment to helping others, through relational organizing. In other words, solidarity is enhanced through bonding among people with common experiences and bridging across difference (Warren & Mapp, 2011). This produces solidarity – the recognition that our destinies are linked in a network of mutuality (King, 1963/1991).

Both the Latinx youth and Nicaraguan women directed their social change efforts toward reducing harm in ways that built and sustained relational networks. The Latinx children interviewed described their social action (i.e., the mural) as a tool to provoke self-reflexivity within the larger community, encouraging people to consider their own responsibilities to others (e.g., by taking care of others). Additionally, women working for change in Nicaragua,

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described combatting structural violence through mobilization of social connections to other women. Although operating in different social contexts, our interviewees describe taking others' perspectives, consideration of their emotional wellbeing, and imagining possibilities for supporting them, especially those most impacted by social exclusion. In this sense they demonstrate a compassionate critical analysis of social problems. Again, rather than freedom from meddling in the affairs of others, an ethic of care as demonstrated by these activists, involves concern, attention and attunement to community-wide struggles.

Liberatory Care and the Push for Just Structures

Finally, both groups interviewed discussed interest and efforts to produce structural change, which included desires or efforts to transform institutions, policies, and dominant cultural narratives, that inhibited justice and wellbeing in their respective communities. Although structural change is predominantly viewed as a justice rather than care-related concern, caring relationships both incentivize and sustain efforts to create structural change. A final example from a Nicaraguan woman, discussing collaborative works to bring electricity into the community demonstrates this relationship:

> **Anjali:** *What other things have you learned since you were organized?*
>
> **Dalena:** *First of all, to get along with the others in my community, and to have good relationships with other women in the community, because together we can do a lot. When we want something that benefits the community, because they give benefits elsewhere, we can defend ourselves. For example, we submitted a letter to a person in Managua about bringing electricity…We took that letter to the [government official] of the community. Then we went to visit the mayor. But they would not let us enter, because they said they were in the municipal session, they said that the people from the community could not enter. Then we said, if they do not allow us to enter, we will form a commission of people. And by force we entered...We were not scared to speak because we were prepared…We said, we are citizens of this community and the government has to take into account everyone…they let us in and they heard us.*

In this example Dalena illustrates how, working in solidarity with other women, she was able to pressure the local government to bring electricity into her community. Importantly, she emphasizes both the value of maintaining good relationships and working together. Conscious interdependence and collective concern is crucial to improve community wellbeing. In several interviews conducted with women who lived in communities where electricity was not available (roughly a quarter), women described the importance of having electricity and how this could improve the community. This was a considerable challenge because the local government often did not want to expend the resources to bring electricity into communities. As this excerpt demonstrates, however, women united the knowledge that they had the right and capacity to demand this benefit for their community, with a relational lens focused on collaboration and mutual encouragement. This illustrates the transformative potential that unfolds through liberatory care, wherein an iterative process of action and reflection (Dutt & Grabe, 2017; Martín-Baró, 1994) and thoughtful focus on community interdependence produces change. Ultimately, working in caring relationship with other women allowed dialog and strategies to emerge that encouraged continued participation, despite obstacles, and eventual success.

Conclusion

As described, ethics of care refers to a moral orientation focused on maintaining relationships, responding to the needs of others, and a responsibility not to cause harm. This orientation runs in direct contrast to the values artic-

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ulated (albeit not always practiced) within neoliberal policies and ideology which prioritize individual needs, freedom *from* responsibility, and efficiency over collective concerns. Moreover, while historically conceptualized as distinct from justice, a united focus on care and justice creates conditions for liberation. Although justice is primarily focused upon producing equitable distribution of all that sustains a healthy life, care is inherently linked because it is associated with ensuring that the needs of individuals within communities are met in a compassionate manner. In this sense, justice is the tile and care the grout in paving a path towards collective liberation.

Indeed, as illustrated among the Latinx youth and Nicaraguan women interviewed, interdependent processes associated with care and social justice are utilized in the promotion of community change. Among the Latinx youth involved in the activist art program, an ethics of care framework aligned with how the children conceptualized and constructed meaning from their own community membership. Furthermore, and perhaps more profoundly, the influence of care ethics in shaping the children's actions and perceptions also presented a challenge to dominant modes and conceptualizations of activism and citizen participation that limit actions directed to promote social justice to a narrowly defined scope of behaviors and actions (e.g., protesting, picketing, voting in elections) that systematically exclude large swaths of the population (i.e., those who are constructed as dependent or who are ineligible to vote, etc.). Despite their status as marginalized youth, too young to participate in many forms of political decision making, the children in this study enact their values and goals for their community through thoughtful, collaborative processes in creating a mural.

Similarly, as members of communities who have been denied rights historically, a strong commitment to working for change that is linked to a sense of collective responsibility was evident across the interviews with Nicaraguan women involved in the feminist organization. The women held an acute understanding of a shared fate with others in the community, and a need to work collaboratively and on behalf of each other. A liberatory ethics of care appears to become an implicit road map utilized in political mobilization, guiding women's efforts as they seek to create transformative and equitable change in their communities.

Collectively, the theories and examples examined in this paper showcase manifestations of care ethics at individual, interpersonal, community and structural levels. In essence, they illustrate bottom-up processes of resistance to neoliberal ideology. The analysis also provokes a number of unanswered questions that we encourage future researchers to explore. For example, how do communities enact and respond to care related concerns differently, and what tensions and/or contradictions arise in these processes. There is also much room to further interrogate the role of power in caring processes, and, in particular how care related priorities, obligations, and actions shift as power dynamics change (e.g., as individuals gain power do they exhibit less care?; who is excluded from care practices, and under what structural circumstances?). Although we argue that care and justice are intimately connected, we do not encourage anyone to overlook the many tensions embedded in their relationship.

With this in mind, we underscore specific commitments that should be maintained in future research and action on liberatory care. First, despite our assertion that care ethics are often developed and honed within marginalized communities, let us be clear that the implications of this paper do not suggest that marginalized communities alone should be responsible for enacting liberatory care. We do not aim to essentialize marginalized communities as inherently caring; rather, we underscore that because of circumstance, communities who cannot depend on the state or dominant structures to ensure care of their communities regularly hone creative tactics to promote care. Neither do we call for the institutionalization of a one-size-fits-all method to promote care. Both ethics of care and liberation psychology were introduced into the fields as values systems and approaches to conceptual-

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izing processes to address inequity and enhance the human experience. In other words, they were not defined as answers to problems, but rather as lenses through which to analyze inequity that could produce transformative change. Thus, we propose a liberatory ethics of care as a framework for community psychologists to ground their research. More specifically, we aim to compel researchers to view care as a primary ingredient for equitable social transformation that can promote wellbeing at individual, interpersonal, community, and structural levels.

There are two additional cautions about the implications of promoting a liberatory ethics of care for which we must remain vigilant. First, Latin American theorists have noted a trend in which NGOs have been forced to address societal inequities in areas where the state was lacking (Alvarez, 1999). In turn, this reduces the state's obligation and willingness to address societal inequities at the level of political structure because the work has already been taken up by NGOs. Secondly, feminist researchers have also noted that an emphasis on women's community participation and obligation to support others via community development adds substantial burden to the already inequitable distribution of labor women the world over endure (Batliwala & Dhanraj, 2004; Grabe, 2015). The current research thus does not suggest that NGOs more attuned to the caring factors that sustain life should replace state responsibility of governments to address societal inequities, nor does it intend to imply that this work should be additional labor added to the backs of women and oppressed communities. Rather, the findings are meant to underscore that liberatory care begets justice and wellbeing at all ecological levels of human life. Indeed, the implications more closely align with policies such as paid parental leave and universal basic income than any policy that shepherds the state away from its obligation to its people.

Finally, although care is irregularly discussed among theorists of social change across the political spectrum, caring tactics among those most privileged have been utilized to maintain hegemonic wealth and power. Indeed, contemporary society is awash with the consequences of this reality, propagated by neoliberal ideology and policy, and illustrated in practices ranging from corporate welfare and political nepotism to raising nationalism among the economically powerful. To resist these trends we must work towards prioritizing and augmenting the voices, concerns and perspectives of communities who have been underserved by existing social structures. There is growing need to cultivate care ethics that bring about equitable social transformation, and we encourage community psychologists to increasingly engage in this effort. Liberatory care carries us towards the possibility of manifesting this boldly compassionate and more socially just alternative world.

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Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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