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POLITICS AND 'APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY': THEORETICAL CONCEPTS THAT QUESTION THE DISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This paper responds to a set of problems in contemporary psychology that cluster around the notion that the discipline might be 'applied' to the real world, and that such application would thereby serve as the methodological and conceptual grounding for 'political psychology'. The specific problems addressed comprise 'interpretation' of material in the quantitative and qualitative traditions, the notion of 'application' as such which rests on the prior modelling of individual and collective psychological phenomena, the conceptions of 'politics' that operate in disciplinary interventions, the idealisation of 'community' in different traditions of community psychology in the US and Europe, and finally 'psychology' itself as the background against which these other problems are elaborated. In response to these problems the paper describes political theoretical concepts from feminist interventions in Left practice and brings them to bear on the discipline of psychology, turning the direction of travel of concepts around so that psychology itself rather than the outside world becomes the object to which ideas are 'applied'. The five political theoretical concepts described here are 'performativity', 'standpoint', 'the personal as political', the 'tyranny of structurelessness' and 'intersectionality'.

Keywords: Applied psychology, Community psychology, Feminism, Performativity, Standpoint, Intersectionality

Introduction

There has been recognition by many psychologists over the years that there is something deeply wrong with the way that the discipline conceptualises its objects of study and the way it treats people (e.g., Prilleltensky, 1994). The catch-cry of the so-called 'new paradigm' movement in social psychology in the 1970s, that we should for scientific purposes treat people as if they were human beings, was merely one articulation of a nagging worry that 'application' of psychology dehumanised people (Harré and Secord, 1972; Reason and Rowan, 1981). That is, this application reinforced a certain kind of view of individuals and buttressed certain kinds of social relationships. This application was itself therefore a form of politics (Ingleby, 1970). The often unspoken political agenda of traditional applied psychology was, in fact, challenged well before the experimental paradigm debates even by US American social psychologists who had attempted to address social issues such as

conformity and prejudice (Condor, 1997). These more liberal, reformist and in some cases radical psychologists looked to political interventions that would bypass the needs of academic institutions and engage directly with communities (Orford, 1992; Rappaport and Seidman, 2000; Fryer and Fox, 2015).

There is a historical and narrative logic in this journey through a social reframing of the objects and aims of research to an application of academic knowledge and then to political interventions that would be rooted in communities. Some psychologists who are still wedded to what we can, as shorthand, refer to as the ‘old paradigm’ are aghast at these developments, at this logic (e.g., Morgan, 1996). For them, experimental methods which manipulate variables to build models which are put to work in the real world can easily include a ‘social’ dimension, can apply what has already been shown to be true in the laboratory (whether that is inside a building or out in the field), and so they complain that an explicit concern with politics introduces unwarranted bias into research. Their ‘community’ is the community of scientific scholars, and the political implications of their studies are handled by their ethics committees (Neill, 2015).

Other psychologists see this logic as being wholly progressive, if not yet completely realised (e.g., Fryer and Fox, 2015). It might be an assumption of many, for example, that things have got better in the discipline but we have way further to go. It is, perhaps, easier for ‘social’ psychologists to fall in line with this narrative and champion it, though there are plenty of other sub-species of psychologist who are also keen on an application of their work that is attuned to political context and would want to be sure that communities would benefit from it. The political implications of what it means to ‘apply’ our theories to other people have been reflected on, for example, by a number of community psychologists (e.g., Kagan and Burton, 1996). But one thing is for sure in this positive reading of the narrative of increased application, connection with politics and engagement with communities; it is that we need more psychology, and that as our psychology becomes more sensitive and reflexive we have more to offer to promote human welfare (Miller, 1969).

There is a big problem with this underlying assumption, that we need more psychology and that it would be all-the better if it were politically progressive and community-oriented. The problem is that there is a disjunction between the perspectives of academically-trained, academically-acculturated psychologists on the one hand and radical political movements in communities on the other (De Vos, 2013; Madsen, 2014). What I want to do in this paper is turn the direction of travel of theory around so that instead of applying our psychological theories to politics we apply some emerging political concepts to psychology. In that way we can open up some of the contradictions in the discipline of psychology and, just as importantly, value contradictions in current political interventions. What we will also need to notice along the way is that ‘psychology’ of some kind enters into these debates, we cannot wish it away, but that there is a handling of conceptions of subjectivity, experience, interiority and identity that is very different from what we would come up with if we were to take debates inside the discipline of psychology as our starting point.

I will take five political theoretical concepts which have been mobilised outside psychology and apply them to questions that we face in the discipline. I should say before I do this that there is an overarching question about how the world is organised in the use of these concepts and how they differ from the way that psychologists are trained to look at things. This also means that although I will take them in turn there cannot be a direct mapping of each concept onto the aspect of psychology I will be concerned with. And that is precisely part of the point of the argument, that if we take them seriously they, these concepts, lead us to a reorganisation of what we think of as the domain of ‘psychology’. I should also say that some of these concepts also figure in academic debate outside

psychology, but that here I am concerned with how they are articulated not only outside the discipline but also outside academic institutions. Each of these concepts has been elaborated in feminist interventions and, just as importantly, as interventions in feminism and in the Left (Arruzza, 2013), and I read them here as a Marxist who has been challenged by them and who has been forced to reconceptualise what I think ‘politics’ is about, just as I hope you will now be challenged and rethink what your favourite ‘psychology’ is about.

From ‘interpretation’ to ‘performativity’

The first concept is that of ‘performativity’, and this also neatly radicalises some of the concerns with ‘performance’ of role according to social rules that were used in new paradigm debates (Butler, 1994). Those notions of performance that borrowed from a ‘dramaturgical’ approach to the presentation of self to others as an audience (Goffman, 1959/1971) now reworked as performativity have direct implications for the way we understand the process of ‘interpretation’ in psychological research. That is, they pertain to what is usually assumed to happen in research before ‘application’. While performance implies that a self-conscious agent configured as some kind of actor in a role follows social rules in order to confirm or add their own distinctive qualities to what they are performing, the notion of performativity runs much deeper, displacing attention from the psychology of the actor to the rules of discourse that are repeated, ‘reiterated’ despite what the actor intends, despite themselves (e.g., Frosh et al., 2003a).

The academic origins of this concept, in the work of the feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990, 1993), very quickly became much less important than the way that it was elaborated in ‘queer’ politics which was a driving force in HIV/AIDS campaigns. The ACT UP campaign against pathologising of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals (LGBT people) and for anti-retroviral drug provision in the US was context for the formation of ‘Queer Nation’, for example, as just one of a number of different radical community groups (Squire, 2013). More recently, ‘Genderqueer’ politics has pitted itself against binary oppositional categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ that structure everyday discourse, and also structure, of course, psychological discourse (Nic Giolla Easpaig et al., 2014). This has been a particularly important intervention not only into psychiatry and psychology as parts of the ‘psy complex’ concerned with understanding and regulating sexuality and identity, but also within the ‘trans’ community (Tosh, 2014). There it challenges the traditional appeal to an interior hidden gender that really exists trapped inside another different biologically-sexed body. There has therefore been questioning of revealed true ‘gender’ in Genderqueer interventions that draws on the idea that ‘coming out’ by lesbians and gays is itself a particular kind of ‘performance’ that relies on and reiterates an ‘epistemology of the closet’ (Sedgwick, 1990).

The double-critique that ‘performativity’ enables thus applies not only to the way that certain kinds of rules are reiterated, as in the declaration after a baby’s birth that ‘it’s a boy’ or ‘it’s a girl’, but how they are enforced, so that the category of ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ is then one that the growing child must conform to and perform in order to taken as normal (Burman, 1995). The double-critique applies not only to the interpretation of things in the world but also to the way that human agents come to configure themselves within rules of interpretation so that they feel themselves to be authentically voiced by and voicing those interpretations themselves (Frosh et al., 2003b).

Psychologists not only repeat certain kinds of rules for the distribution of qualities to different genders of course, which is one way that ‘performativity’ from queer politics then disturbs their work. At a more fundamental level there is a presumed distribution of gendered performances of reading and writing in the rules of scientific research which divides

objective, neutral, distanced knowledge – that which can then be ‘applied’ – from subjectivity, and engaged, participatory inquiry (Brinkmann, 2014). On the one side is the more stereotypically masculine scientific paradigm, and on the other is the stereotypically feminine non-scientific one (Broughton, 1988). However, the performative dimension is present on both sides of the equation, and the little trap that we need to be careful to avoid is not to fall into one which is now more thoroughly ‘psychologised’ when we flee from the other. When I say ‘psychologised’ I mean saturated with psychological discourse that the speaker then declares to be expressive of their being (De Vos, 2013).

For example, if we step back from the debates between quantitative and qualitative research that have divided psychologists in recent years – a false opposition in itself that sustains quite mistaken views of what science is and what the paradigm debates were about – we can see that one newer set of rules of interpretation has come to compete with another one more well established in the discipline. The new set of rules that govern qualitative research, participatory research and suchlike are no less normative than the old ones, and correspond uncannily to what has been called ‘the programme era’ in creative writing in which the rules concern ‘experience’, ‘creativity’ and ‘craft’, and are explicitly formulated as ‘write what you know’, ‘find your voice’ and ‘show, don’t tell’ (McGurl, 2009). While they seem to accord better with a feminist sensibility, the debates around ‘performativity’ in queer politics indicates that they also draw those who follow such rules deeper into the very apparatus of ‘discipline’ and ‘confession’ that structures the psy complex (Ingleby, 1985).

‘Performativity’ draws attention to how the opposition between paradigms, between quantitative and qualitative research, is reiterated as if it were an opposition just as thoroughly as is the discourse of a gender binary. And it draws attention to how the bad old mechanistic psychology that could then be ‘applied’ to people is replaced with a more insidiously convincing revealed psychology that the researcher experiences themselves to be ‘discovering’ and which then chimes with the psychologised explanations that they hear around them in a community (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997). The most dangerous moment is when the researcher escapes the experimental paradigm that, they come to believe, did not allow them to write and speak what they felt, and experiences as a moment of liberation their induction into a new set of rules of interpretation. They do not see these as rules of interpretation, but rules they are, and even though they may feel liberated they must speak about themselves and what they are required to describe as their intuitive connection with those they work with.

From ‘application’ to ‘standpoint’

I have put the problem of induction into the performance of rules of interpretation at its starkest so we can better appreciate the second concept, which is that of ‘standpoint’ (Henwood et al., 1998). The notion of ‘standpoint’ in research complicates the story because it appears to celebrate exactly what ‘performativity’ questions. That is, it is tempting to read performativity as a warning against the use of personal ‘experience’ as a touchstone for correct interpretation and for action against injustice, and to read ‘standpoint’ as valuing experience as the basis from which to develop questions and theories. What makes standpoint so interesting and useful, so applicable to psychology, is not so much that it coexists with performativity inside cultural-theoretical debates in the academic world but that it sometimes appears to compete with it in the field of politics.

The notion of ‘standpoint’ appears to compete with that of ‘performativity’ at those moments when psychologisation is at its most intense in politics, that is when a psychological discourse of ‘experience’ is being used to interpret what standpoint is concerned with (De Vos, 2011). However, even at those moments of contestation there is a productive tension

between the two concepts, for they together draw attention to broader questions of the relationship between knowledge and interests, of the way that partial views of the world become the ruling views, become 'hegemonic', and how other partial viewpoints may disclose something more of the truth about the totality of social relations. As with 'performativity' then, 'standpoint feminism' was an intervention in the real world outside academic debate that became more significant when it was actually put into practice and elaborated by political activists (Arruzza, 2013).

The first political intervention was one that was actually compatible with and then complicated Marxism, introducing not only a feminist dimension into critique of political economy but also questions about what kind of political agent was presumed to be able to enact that critique, moving on from interpretation of the world to changing it. From the insight that the ruling ideology, and then also social scientific research questions, reflect the preoccupations of those with access to resources, to power, came an analysis of the way that those who suffer power thereby see something different, perhaps more accurate, of the nature of its operations. A crass conspiratorial form of Marxism might claim that the ruling class, which benefits from the existence of capitalism, would therefore propagate an ideological understanding of the world, and the working class would be bewitched by a form of 'false consciousness' in which things were not as they seemed (Augoustinos, 1999). The 'camera obscura' metaphor to describe the operation of ideology as inverting our representation of the world could be used in this way (Marx and Engels, 1845/1970). The 'standpoint' argument reverses and transforms that version of Marxism.

First, 'standpoint' not only discloses the world to participants, it also conceals it, and for the ruling class and those in positions of power their partial view of the world corresponds to their own interests and obscures the operations of the very power they benefit from (Harding, 2003). A first reversal and transformation, then, is that 'false consciousness' pertains to those in power at least as much, if not more, than the dispossessed. Second, 'standpoint' concerns the distribution of rights to elaborate knowledge that is 'situated' rather than being enclosed and fixed (Haraway, 1988). There is no direct reflection of reality for any participant, but a question of how knowledge is mediated by social position. Third, 'standpoint' as mediated knowledge is viewed as potential, processual and collective in nature, requiring theoretical work to address questions arising from the perspective of those who suffer power. In this way 'standpoint feminism' brings in the perspective of women subjected to patriarchal rule alongside the working class and connects the activity of interpretation and change, and it is therefore also authentically Marxist (Hartsock, 1987). A feminist standpoint in politics has enabled the voicing of perspectives on power by women who are marginalised not only by the dominant ideologies and state policies, but also by male Left activists who repeat those forms of exclusion in their own practice. For example, the insistence that a woman who makes an accusation of domestic violence or rape should be believed as a starting point for investigation into what happened is underpinned by a 'standpoint' position (Pratt et al., 2004). This standpoint is not a mere narcissistic identification with an individual woman who claims to have suffered at the hands of men, but is embedded in a form of knowledge, of the prevalence of violence against women, of how difficult it is to make such an accusation, and of the privilege that is usually accorded men in the investigation process (Bhattacharya, 2013). The response by some Marxists, among others, who see this as a dubious appeal to 'experience' is then, ironically, attributing a psychological argument to a political position that is actually, when operating alongside 'performativity' and other feminist concepts, developing an alternative to psychology (cf., Heartfield, 2013).

There are a number of implications for psychology, a discipline that does tend, by virtue of its reduction of perspectives to the standpoint of individuals, to adopt a

conspiratorial version of Marxism, when it remains faithful to its governing precepts. There is a tendency in social psychological experimental research, for example, to interpret ‘false consciousness’ as a series of cognitive errors (e.g., Jost et al., 1995), quite different from debate in Marxism itself where ideology is seen as entailing a ‘necessary false consciousness’ that corresponds to the way the world actually is in capitalist society (Sohn-Rethel, 1978). Even if we were to adopt that first conspiratorial view, one which would lead the psychologist to ‘apply’ their knowledge to correct the mistakes of the oppressed, ‘standpoint theory’s first reversal would lead us to suspect that it is the psychologists who are actually afflicted by false consciousness, and then, in the second reversal, the kind of situated knowledge they elaborate would all the more effectively shield them from a true account of the operations of power. The third reversal would necessitate a view of knowledge as potential, processual and collective that would break from pretty well every model of the individual that psychology subscribes to (Chakrabarti and Dhar, 2010).

From ‘politics’ to the ‘personal’

The reworking of ‘experience’, transforming it from something susceptible to psychological research into something quite different, locating it in a quite different map of subjectivity, interiority and identity, brings us to the question of ‘politics’ as such, and to an alternative to ‘political psychology’ which is too often understood to be equivalent to the psychology of politics (Montero, 2015). The third concept is captured in the slogan from second-wave feminism that ‘the personal is political’ (Rowbotham et al., 2013). First wave feminism at the beginning of the twentieth century included the struggles of the suffragettes and women participating in the Russian revolution, and present-day ‘third wave’ feminism includes queer activists and those who disturb rather than champion the category of woman. The second wave of the late 1960s and 1970s included socialist and standpoint feminists whose interventions, still cutting through current Left political debates, were double-edged (Arruzza, 2013).

On the one hand, the argument that the ‘personal is political’ drew attention to the way systemic alienation and violence under capitalism and patriarchy operated not only through the state apparatus but also through everyday relationships. Forms of interpersonal behaviour, body-language and control of space as well as forms of language, labelling and categorisation became the focus of political critique, and the ‘interiorisation’ of oppression which entitled the powerful and silenced the powerless was also addressed in the ‘consciousness-raising’ workshops of the Women’s Liberation Movement (Henley, 1979; Spender, 1980). The family, which functioned as a haven from the heartless world of work was also thrown into question as a prison-house for many women, as an apparatus that enforced compulsory heterosexuality as a taken-for-granted norm (Zaretsky, 1976). The domain of the ‘personal’ thus became reconfigured as the place where political relationships were replicated and reinforced, and not only destructive, exploitative relationships. If the domain of the ‘personal’ was itself political, then painful and liberating work on this domain would be crucial to the revolutionary transformation of society.

It is here that ‘prefigurative politics’ emerged, and an argument that the very activity of changing the world should anticipate in its forms of struggle the kinds of equal, freer more open relationships that socialists and feminists hoped for in the future (Kagan and Burton, 2000). Recently revulsion at violence against women inside Left organisations has led to these arguments being taken up by the latest generation of third wave feminist activists, and the prefigurative nature of political struggle in the domain of the personal has also again opened connections between socialist, feminist and anti-racist interventions, as well as including questions of disability and mental health. The reaction of the male-dominated Left

has often been to complain that the personal is not political enough, and to wilfully misconstrue these feminist interventions as being self-indulgent petit-bourgeois quasi-therapeutic distractions from the real struggle. There is indeed a connection between politics and psychology embedded in this concept, but it is one that is more corrosive of the discipline of psychology itself (Wilkinson, 1997).

The disappointments of the Left after failures of different alternative projects through the 1970s and 1980s did lead a number of activists into psychotherapy, as consumers and then as enablers and providers, and away from politics as such (Totton, 2006). But this phenomenon, which is part of more widespread ‘psychologisation’ of contemporary culture, should not obscure the critique of the ‘psy complex’ that was necessitated by the argument that the personal is political. The anti-psychiatry movement, for example, was, in many countries directly linked to the Left, and the turn to alternative therapies was driven by an attempt to find alternatives to psychological approaches viewed as intrinsically oppressive (Cromby et al., 2013). The aim was not to find an alternative psychology that could then be ‘applied’ to politics, or a ‘political psychology’ that could substitute for politics as such. Rather, the concern with the personal and prefigurative dimensions of political struggle entailed a notion of the ‘personal’, and of ‘experience’ and ‘consciousness’, that broke from psychology as it is described in the textbooks and practiced in the clinics.

So, on the other hand, alongside feminist critique of the systemic alienation and violence that pervaded everyday life was the construction of a new standpoint, of those pathologised by the psy complex, and pathologised all the more for resisting their oppression. Politics as such is in this way reconfigured so that is very different from the alienated domain of self-promotion, bureaucratic machination and social policy separated from the individual human beings who are invited to participate in it as good citizens. Personal responses to political events are reconfigured so they are not simply what occur inside each individual so that they may then be ‘empowered’ to participate better (Riger, 1993). The link between the two reified domains of ‘politics’ and ‘psychology’ is not then made through ‘application’, which itself repeats the separation between the two even as it reiterates an instrumental relationship between those accorded the identity of professional, that is the psychologist, and those positioned as supplicants, victims or potentially good others willing to be enrolled in the knowledge generously offered to them (McLaughlin, 2011). This benevolent attitude to non-psychologists is, of course, from the standpoint of a professional whose credentials and status are, in many countries, protected by law.

Instead, the slogan ‘the personal is political’ prefigures a quite different way of conceptualising what each element of the phrase pertains to. It constructs a ‘standpoint’ which ‘queers’, we might say, the kind of relationships presumed by psychology that would like to ‘apply’ itself to the world, and it throws into relief the way that ‘application’ of psychology is already implicated in a certain set of profoundly ideological political relationships.

From ‘community’ to ‘structure’

Consciousness-raising format workshops as a model for other practical interventions in times of second wave feminism raised a question about ‘structure’ which has implications for the way we think about the ‘community’ as target of psychological interventions today. It was actually feminists in the anarchist movement who drew attention to what is known as ‘the tyranny of structurelessness’ in ostensibly free-flowing political meetings (Freeman, 1970). This fourth concept, of structure which returns unbidden and invisible to reproduce relations of power inside radical political movements, is connected with the argument about the personal and the political. The argument is that patterns of relationship, between men and

women, for example, are always at work at a micro-level under capitalism and patriarchy, and that these patterns can be even more pernicious when there is the pretence that they do not exist because everything is open and transparent.

The ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ names the forms of oppressive relationship that flourish when rules of organisation are dismissed as authoritarian, and the concept captures not only what goes on inside the meetings but the forms of access, implicit rules of inclusion and exclusion that facilitate some voices and inhibit others. One aspect of the problem concerns the impact of already-existing structured groups that threaten to colonise the ‘unstructured’ organisation. These might include social categories maintained performatively around identity, common interest networks or friendship groups (Dashtipour, 2011). The other aspect of the problem is that the very attempt to prohibit existing structures will also make it more difficult for those without confidence or resources to organise and challenge those in power.

The ‘tyranny’ referred to therefore also concerns the maintenance of a discrete identity of the group which is idealised as a free space which needs to protect itself against intrusion of hostile forms of organisation, but which then ends up repeating those self-same organisational forms. Here there is an uncanny connection with highly-organised Left groups that do not allow women or other oppressed groups to organise autonomously inside them, and the claims about openness and transparency in the group as a whole are again used to smooth over antagonism, effectively to prevent fractures in the identity and leadership of the group from coming out into the open (cf. Potter and Halliday, 1990).

We are now able to appreciate why psychologists who intervene in communities, and who combine two identities in their interventions – that of ‘psychologist’ and that of ‘community’ participant – should be treated with suspicion by political activists who have absorbed the lessons of the concepts I have described so far (Fox, 2013). The two main traditions of community psychology in the English-speaking world are underwritten by institutional allegiances to university structures and external funding bodies which in different ways place a strain on their well-meaning attempt to empower people and even to politicise psychology (Kagan et al., 2011; Fox and Fryer, 2015). In both cases there are notions of good participative citizenship encouraged which mirror the activity and identity of the community psychologist as ideal-typical citizen. The main problem, however, concerns not so much the individual identity of the psychologist and their allies in the target community who are entreated to identify with them – the aim of self-sufficiency and sustainability is taken to mean that the psychologist leaves behind some replicas of themselves who will carry on the work when they have left – but in addition the notion of ‘identity’ itself, is identity of the community (Rappaport and Seidman, 2000).

In the case of the US-American tradition there is indeed an emphasis on ‘structure’ in which a panoply of models of communication and levels of analysis guide the psychologist to contract their work with community leaders who will agree with the series of ideals that are promised in the project outline (Levine and Perkins, 1997). These ideals usually today include stipulations about ‘health’ and ‘wellbeing’ which range from direct physical support to ameliorate sickness and poverty, which are themselves defined according to objective indices so that the value of the intervention can be measured, to moral frameworks which the community has to abide by if they are to receive help (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2010). This version of psychology does effectively colonise communities with a model of social organisation that requires the exclusion of competing organisations, including political parties who have their own specific agendas for social change. In this case the surreptitious ‘structure’ that the community psychologist introduces, one which must be in line with the institutional agendas and career trajectories of external agents, idealises the ‘community’ and open transparent decision-making within it all the better to enforce its own criteria for

membership and participation. In this way community psychology operates as a kind of politics, one which aims to displace rival forms, and which can call upon the apparatus of the psy-complex to delegitimize and pathologise those in the community who object to it (Kagan et al., 2011).

In the case of so-called 'European' community psychology which tries to take the moral high-ground over its US rivals there is an appeal to a variety of different interventions outside the English-speaking world in which local cultures and ethos are honoured, but only to the extent that these local cultures and ethos themselves conform to what the community psychologist understands to be good for them (Burton and Kagan, 2009). This ostensibly more radical version of community psychology sometimes defines itself even as being a form of 'liberation' psychology, but it is still psychology nonetheless, and only success stories of community projects in which participants have fulfilled the ideal of the psychologist are reported (Prilleltensky and Nelson, 2002). In this case the warnings about the 'tyranny of structurelessness' are even more apposite, and in place of explicit 'models' of the structure of communities, there is a series of narratives about successful self-organisation which invariably include reference to charismatic figures who enjoy support by virtue of their spiritual or shamanic status (Freire, 1970/ 2005; Martín-Baró, 1994). Here, the idealisation of the community as integrated holistic wholesome space is combined with the idealisation of community leaders. In this way 'community' still refers to a shared identity which all the good citizens must participate in and 'psychology' is still present in the particular identity of those who are like the psychologist as external agent, those who will then appear in the stories about their community told to other psychologists in academic forums (Kloos et al, 2012).

From 'psychology' to 'intersectionality'

The problem of privileging one account of social structure, explicitly or implicitly, and the downplaying of supposedly less important axes of oppression for the greater good of the community or political organisation, is what has recently led to the popularity in the feminist and anti-racist Left of the fifth concept I will describe, which is that of 'intersectionality' (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Intersectionality emerged from the experiences of black feminists in the US trying to make sense of the complex interrelationship of different forms of oppression (Hill Collins, 2000), and has been crucial to recent activist arguments about and against 'identity politics' and as progressive alternative to squabbles about who loses out most in supposed 'hierarchies of oppression' (Nayak, 2014). It tackles not only the divide and rule strategies of those in power in society which set different oppressed groups against each other but also the way these strategies are replicated in Left and feminist and black organisations (Lutz et al., 2011).

The guiding metaphor for this concept is actually a bit misleading, drawing on the US American term 'intersection' to describe a traffic crossroads where different streams of vehicles coming from various directions pass each other and sometimes crash into each other (Crenshaw, 1989). The point is not that there are separate streams of traffic but that when there is a crash it is often difficult to distinguish where each of the tyre skids on the road originate from. This metaphor was used to unravel legal restrictions on complainants wanting to argue that they were discriminated against not only by virtue of being women, say, but also of being black. The category 'black woman' then appears at the intersection of different forms of oppression, and opens up the question of how women in feminist movements are affected by racism, how black communities are structured by sexism, and so on (Phoenix, 1994). The challenge it poses to the Left is that racism, sexism and other forms of oppression need to be taken seriously in the working class, the class which some Marxists

would prefer to see as a homogeneous category whose particular identity needs to be affirmed in the most important over-riding struggle against capitalism (Smith, 2014).

The term 'intersectionality' has been used recently in Left organisations attempting to take feminism seriously following incidents of violence against women by male leaders, cover ups in the organisations and claims that feminism was a 'diversion' from class politics (Platt, 2014). The concept then functions in two ways. First, as marking a field of debate in which questions of racism and the position of black women can be raised, and in which there could be discussions of the way that 'identities' are formed, dissolved and reassembled in different contexts, 'performatively' we might say. Also of the way that different structural positions disclose different 'standpoints' on power, and the way that personal experience might or might not be a grounding for an alternative politics (Erel et al., 2011). In this way 'intersectionality' draws attention to the more extensive 'layout' of oppression, and has made discussion more fluid so new alliances might be formed (Puar, 2012). The second way it functions is as one of the names for feminism among the old male Left enraged by the challenge to their own notions of identity, personally as leaders and collectively of the little closed communities they govern. The term 'intersectionality' has been attacked more vituperatively than any of the other concepts, with its opponents trying to fix a meaning as if it were concerned with the collection of 'sectional' identities or interests (e.g., Demarty, 2014).

There are actually many competing concepts colliding and combining in the concept 'intersectionality', and this poses a challenge to psychological descriptions of individuals and communities (Brah and Phoenix, 2004). It is perhaps not surprising that psychologists who intervene in communities, the most practical social 'applied' psychologists, are torn between wanting rival political organisations out of the way altogether on the one hand, and admiring of strong leaders who fulfil their own programme of reforms most effectively on the other. We are then, for example, faced with some serious political differences between psychologists who cannot avoid an encounter with political movements and those completely outside the situation who can pretend that everything is going to plan. On the one hand, there are local 'social', 'community' and 'political' psychologists in Latin America who are confronted with well-organised, in some cases authoritarian Left movements linked to the state with resources to implement 'health' and 'wellbeing' policies, thus sidelining the psychologists altogether. On the other, there are Western 'liberation' psychologists who side with populist leaders, silence criticism of them as being imperialist propaganda, and thus reinforce local power structures while pretending to be transforming them (Sapene-Chapellin, 2009).

If the identity of an individual or group cannot be pinned in place as something prior to its enactment in series of relationships with others who are performing different competing identities, then the role of the psychologist becomes redundant. There are no models of the psychology of those engaging in politics to be studied, and certainly no variables that could be disaggregated and tested in the field. What there is that might be referred to as 'psychology' in this context is something that is constituted and reconstituted in the political process. The puzzling about experience and identity is 'performative', taking place as it happens or after the event. It is as if 'action research' has been finally released into the real world and operates completely independently of professional expertise. There is simply nothing to 'apply'.

Conclusions

The five concepts I described have each and together had a profound impact on Left organisations. But they also have far-reaching implications for psychologists who want to intervene in politics.

The ‘performative’ turn in LGBT communities provoked the initialisation LGBTQ – ‘Q’ for Queer – and then a range of other complications to the identity of those involved, as ‘I’ for Intersex and ‘A’ for Asexual were added, for example (Carrigan et al., 2014). That tradition of political intervention has as part of its recorded reiterated memory the mobilisation against the category of ‘homosexuality’ as a form of pathology in the DSM back in the 1970s, and has sensitised activists to the attempts by psychiatrists or psychologists to ‘interpret’ their behaviour. The ‘standpoint’ of different categories of ‘user’ or ‘consumer’ of psychological services also throws into question not only the ways that a psychologist uses a preferred model to make a diagnosis or prediction about behaviour, but also about how standpoints change over time, in many cases too rapidly for journals and textbooks to keep track of them (Spivak, 1988). While the term ‘prefigurative’ been recuperated in some community psychological interventions, the insistence that the personal is political effectively blocks attempts to define what the two elements are so that there are questions raised about the extent to which they can be described in psychological terms (cf. Walsh and Gokani, 2014). An attention to the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ frustrates, on the one hand, the attempt to put preformed models of a group or community to work and, on the other, the fantasy that there are political spaces that correspond to the ideals of ‘liberation’ psychology, free of structure (Kothari, 2011). And an attention to ‘intersectionality’ rather than discrete objects assembled in models serves to emphasise that, taken together with the other concepts from feminist interventions in Left politics, the conceptual and methodological map of the world must be completely different from what psychologists have been led to expect (e.g., Phoenix, 1994).

These concepts indicate that a psychologist who wants to be involved in politics cannot ‘apply’ what they know, and they eventually will have to abandon their own separate academic and professional identity if they are to take the people they work with seriously. Psychology that pretends to have knowledge that can be ‘applied’ to problems in what is imagined to be the ‘real world’ actually adds to those problems. This psychology is not at all an alternative to politics, but functions as a form of politics that is tied to the agenda of its own disciplinary community. There is an array of new political concepts that bear on the questions that psychology asks of the world, of which this paper has explored but five, but we have to turn to actual political practice to discover how we might make use of them and to question the discipline of psychology in the process.

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