

Sociopolitical Development

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This paper examines theories and concepts relevant to sociopolitical development (SPD). As an emerging theory, SPD expands on empowerment and similar ideas related to social change and activism in community psychology—oppression, liberation, critical consciousness, and culture among them. SPD is the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and the capacity for action in political and social systems necessary to interpret and resist oppression. Equally as important is a vision of liberation that is an alternative to oppressive conditions. All of these concepts have been underemphasized in the social change literature of U.S. community psychology. In our view, sociopolitical development is vital to human development and the creation of a just society. As part of identifying and illustrating concepts and processes relevant to SPD theory, we will draw from the words of young African American activists who were interviewed as part of a research study.

KEY WORDS: activism; sociopolitical development; empowerment; African Americans; social change; oppression; liberation.

This paper seeks to expand our thinking about social change and empowerment so that it may be applicable to a wider scope of human experience. Prevailing notions of empowerment do not fully address social action in the context of oppression and for the purpose of liberation. In contrast, sociopolitical development (SPD) emphasizes an understanding of the cultural and political forces that shape one's status in society. We use it to describe a process of growth in a person's knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and capacity for action in political and social systems. SPD is not limited to resisting oppression in the interest of justice, however; the capacity to envision and help create a just society is an essential part of the process as well. Although the term does not explicitly include cultural and economic understanding, we include growth in these areas as part of the definition. In addressing social justice, U.S. commu-

nity psychology has focused much of its attention on the construct of empowerment. As useful as this idea is, the concepts of oppression, liberation, and human rights are not at the center of theory and analysis. One of our goals is to move oppression, liberation, and human rights from the margins to the center of the field. Although we will concentrate on oppression as experienced by African Americans, we hope this begins a wide-ranging dialogue among action scholars having an interest in critical psychology (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997) and in a practical and broadly applicable theory of liberation psychology.

Typically, the notion of empowerment is limited to the capacity, and the creation or perception of a capacity for effective action. "Psychological" empowerment "refers to empowerment at an individual level of analysis. . . . Perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the social environment" (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 581). At higher levels of analysis, it is seen as the processes that enhance a person's capacity to understand and change systems (e.g. Swift & Levin, 1987). Seldom do these conceptualizations involve an analysis of how social power produces and sustains social inequity or the psychological, spiritual, or material

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implications of dehumanization, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. All of these can occur as part of oppression.

THE MECHANICS OF SOCIAL OPPRESSION

According to Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999), oppression as a *process* is the unjust use of power by one socially salient group over another in a way that creates and sustains inequity in the distribution of coveted resources. Serrano-García (1984) described the origins of this inequity as an “asymmetrical state” in the distribution of coveted resources. Oppression is maintained and propagated through overt or material violence (i.e., physical coercion and terror, denial of rights and resources, restriction of mobility, etc.) and by subtle or ideological violence (i.e., institutionally codified racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and related practices). Physical and ideological violence act in mutually reinforcing patterns such that physical violence establishes social domination and ideological violence legitimizes and normalizes oppressive social relationships and material inequity (Williams, 1998). The dynamics are complex, but we see ideological violence at the core of oppression. A facet of ideological violence is cultural subordination or “natal alienation” (Patterson, 1982) whereby the cultural heritage of the oppressed is distorted or obliterated by the oppressor. Fanon (1963) in analyzing oppression under African colonialism wrote,

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today. (p. 210)

To effectively confront oppression, it is necessary to deconstruct its subtle ideological foundations and challenge its overt abuses and deprivations. One of the skills or competencies required for this effort is a sociopolitical analysis of oppression. Another is the application of these insights to social change.

ASPECTS OF SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT (SPD)

Much of the literature on SPD cited so far begins with an exploration of oppression and the role of critical awareness in perceiving and resisting it. Resistance

is key, because analysis without action does not produce tangible change. Therefore, *activism*—doing something about oppression—warrants particular attention. One definition of an activist is a person who acts strategically with others, on the basis of shared values, to create a more just society. The strategies include changing how society or its institutions operate (reform, evolution) and creating new institutions or a new society on the basis of alternative principles (revolution, transformation). Methods and tactics include political participation, pressure tactics aimed at gaining concessions, armed struggle, or operating an organization with a mission of social change or liberation. These methods require knowledge, skills, and capacity; so activism also includes methods aimed at building capacity thorough community organizing, training, educating, and mobilizing. Although activism is obviously important, it is only one of many manifestations of the SPD process. Uncritical awareness, everyday unconscious acts of resistance (Kelly, 1994; Scott, 1990), self-sacrificial political behavior, and what Huey Newton (a leader of the Black Panthers) called “revolutionary suicide” (Newton, 1973, p. 4) are all potential aspects of SPD. We focus on activists, but SPD is relevant to anyone living in an oppressive society.

Taking a Cultural Perspective

Because of our interest in African American activism, it is particularly important to ground the theory in African (American) culture and liberation traditions. Culture is a shared system of meaning that informs interpersonal and institutional processes within a given human community. Woodson's longstanding insights on the “miseducation of the Negro” and the function of Black education in the postslavery era are useful in understanding the challenges of African American SPD (Woodson, 1919). He described how the educational system controlled by former slave masters was a system of indoctrination that reinforced European cultural hegemony. It promoted the internalization of oppression. This analysis illustrates how institutions serve vested interests and their vision of culture by shaping social roles and human relations. One of the few psychiatrists of African descent to examine these dynamics of oppression was Fanon (1963). He noted that oppression creates “dialectically dependent” beings (i.e., the oppressed and the oppressors) and institutions that perpetuate oppression through dependent roles. To him, true liberation must stem from the indigenous culture of the

oppressed with a focus on creating new unified beings (i.e., the liberated) and new institutions that reflect these changes.

We conceive of African American culture as a complex mixture of African and European cultural traditions (e.g., Boykin, 1983). Each of these traditions is composed of an array of interrelated cultural themes with which one might identify. The African American challenge of crafting a cultural identity anchored in their African heritage is further complicated by a need to negotiate European American cultural racism (Jones, 1997). This challenge to healthy self-definition is one reason why racial identity must occupy a prominent role in our thinking and in African American psychology as well as in the psychology of other populations with a history of oppression (Watts, 1994). In a struggle against racial oppression, African Americans benefit from a strong sense of self that incorporates both the cultural and sociopolitical aspects of their African heritage. This confluence results in the emergence of a racialized cultural identity (Jagers, Mattis, & Walker, in press; Lamont, 1999). These identities may contribute to SPD by guiding an understanding of power and privilege within the prevailing moral order, and by shaping a conception of existing and optimal ethnoracial group relations (Gutiérrez, 1995; Jagers et al., in press).

Critical Consciousness

As SPD proceeds, a person becomes increasingly aware of existing social inequities and their history. This includes distinguishing the processes (e.g., policies and practices) and the outcomes (e.g., subjugation, trauma, and social and personal dysfunction) of oppression. Brazilian educator-activist Freire (1990) calls this awareness “critical consciousness” or conscientization, and he describes a liberatory pedagogy for enhancing it. Based on work by Gramsci, Hopper (1999) provides a helpful definition of this analytic aspect of SPD in describing “the importance of symbolic forays against cultural ‘hegemony’ to the larger struggle”:

[it is]... learning to think critically about accepted ways of thinking and feeling, discerning the hidden interests in underlying assumptions and framing notions (whether these be class-, gender-, race/ethnicity- or sect-based). It means learning to see, in the mundane particulars of ordinary lives, how history works, how received ways of thinking and feeling serve to perpetuate existing structures of inequality. (p. 210)

Critical consciousness can lead to different ideological outcomes; strictly speaking, there is no one set of conclusions that everyone should reach. Diversity precludes that. To press for equal outcomes turns the process of critical consciousness development into indoctrination. Nonetheless, in the interest of a disclosure of our values, our notion of liberation is at odds with ideologies that do not acknowledge oppression in all its forms and with strategies that do not take direct aim at social and economic inequities. Thus, our perspective calls for progressive social change at minimum.

Liberation and Ideology

As important as consciousness and resistance are, we contend that there is much more to the experience of oppressed people than their oppression. If this is the sole emphasis, we do little more than substitute one deficit orientation toward human beings for another. Liberation requires vision—a transition from critique to creativity. Critique reveals the need for new ideas and action, but creativity is required to envision a better cultural and moral order. For example, Black nationalists base a vision of liberation on self-determination and a reascension of African culture, while Marxist–Leninists emphasize a materialist, egalitarian economic order based on worker rule. Less radical activists may focus on reform, economic and community development, or participation in partisan politics in an effort to make democracy work. Activists with roots in the traditional civil rights movement pursue a vision of racial tolerance, equal opportunity, and justice under the law. Yet, all agree on the need to transform institutions and create new modes of operation. Goals range from gaining concessions from existing systems to the total deconstruction and reconstruction of systems.

In developing a theory of SPD, it may not be necessary to take a particular ideological stance in defining liberation. In our view, liberation in its fullest sense requires the securing of full human rights and the remaking of a society without roles of oppressor and oppressed. Like oppression, liberation can be understood as both a process and an outcome. It involves challenging gross social inequities between social groups and creating new relationships that dispel oppressive social myths, values, and practices. The outcome of this process contributes to the creation of a changed society with ways of being that support the economic, cultural, political,

psychological, social, and spiritual needs of individuals and groups.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SPD

What has been presented so far suggests that SPD is a journey from a place of relative uninformed inaction on the social forces that affect our lives to one of sustained, informed, and strategic action. Table I shows a psychological stage theory that the first author and his colleagues constructed (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998), based on work by Serrano-García and López Sánchez (1992) and on work by Ander-Egg (1980). This model guided our initial thinking about the process of SPD. The model has five stages, beginning with and emphasizing critical consciousness as a prerequisite for further development. The first stage is characterized by a lack of awareness of social inequity, or a belief that it is a just inequity that reflects the abilities and motivations of the groups in question. In essence, this is a belief in a “just world” (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). As an awareness of unjust social inequity emerges, it may produce only accommodation or adaptation without a belief that personal or collective action can make a difference (Stages 1 and 2). This is the first instance where empowerment is relevant—a willingness to act requires a sense of agency. An emerging critical consciousness also moves SPD forward here. One begins to look beyond facile explanations for events and an emphasis on their immediate causes. Injustice begins to be understood in historical context, and as SPD proceeds, the developing individual acquires a more systemic perspective on his or her life circumstances and current events. Discontent, indignation, empathy, and other emotions provide the drive to act as well as understand. Empowering attitudes again come into play, giving the emerging activist the sense of agency needed to create or make beneficial changes in social systems. If the conditions

for this mode of consciousness and action are supported in the environment, liberation behavior characteristic of the liberation stage can be established. In sum, as SPD proceeds critical consciousness and proficiency in political analysis becomes increasingly sophisticated, it is informed by action, and the synergy of action and reflection enhances the skills (what some might call competencies) needed for effective liberation behavior.

An aspect of SPD that deserves more attention in this theory is the role of social context and of significant life experiences. Leading liberation psychology theorists including Martín-Baró (1994) frequently describe SPD as a product of a synergistic relationship between practice (i.e., liberation behavior) and reflection. One immediate implication of this for the theory of SPD we have presented is that critical consciousness, analysis, and psychological empowerment advance in concert with liberation behavior. In psychological terms, one could say that for an activist’s social change schemas to grow ever more sophisticated and accurate, she or he must gain experience with them in the realm of action. Praxis also builds confidence in the confrontation of oppression as one sees the vulnerability of the oppressor and the impact of one’s own power. Personal and collective weaknesses of the activist(s) become apparent too when acting against oppressive systems, which provides the feedback needed for further development. As noted previously, the construct of empowerment is particularly relevant to the liberation stage, as it is concerned with the “. . . combination of self-acceptance and *self-confidence*, social and political understanding, and *the ability to play an assertive role* in controlling resources and decisions in one’s community” (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988, p. 726, emphasis added). As part of his examination of liberation and community psychology from an African-centered perspective, Brookins (1999) reframes this general definition of empowerment and makes it specific to the African American

Table I. A Theory of Sociopolitical Development

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1. *Acritical stage:* Asymmetry is outside of awareness, or the existing social order is thought to reflect real differences in the capabilities of group members. In essence, it is a “Just World” (Rubin & Peplau, 1975).
 2. *Adaptive stage:* Asymmetry may be acknowledged, but the system maintaining it is seen as immutable. Predatory, antisocial, or accommodation strategies are employed to maintain a positive sense of self and to acquire social and material rewards.
 3. *Precritical stage:* Complacency gives way to awareness of and concerns about asymmetry and inequality. The value of adaptation is questioned.
 4. *Critical stage:* There is a desire to learn more about asymmetry, injustice, oppression, and liberation. Through this process, some will conclude that the asymmetry is unjust and social-change efforts are warranted.
 5. *Liberation stage:* The experience and awareness of oppression is salient. Liberation behavior (involvement in social action and community development) is tangible and frequent. Adaptive behaviors are eschewed.
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historical experience. His review of the African psychology literature finds two central themes in the construct of empowerment—race consciousness and self-actualization. Thus, for African Americans, and perhaps others who experience oppression, “social and political understanding” means racial and cultural understanding in particular. As mentioned previously in connection with a Black Nationalist political perspective, the term “self-determination” has a special resonance for many African Americans. It breathes special relevance into what Zimmerman and Rappaport describe as “controlling resources.” Although the two definitions of empowerment are compatible, it is clear that situating an idea in the history and cultural experience of the population of interest offers advantages. It grounds the ideas in an ecologically valid and credible knowledge base.

The theory of SPD presented here allows for comparative analyses across individuals, which is an asset, but an individual’s “progress” must also be assessed according to his/her unique circumstances and context. SPD is a relative notion. Teaching African American youth to read might be a benign act today, but it would have been heroic under the system of North American slavery and in the post-Reconstruction South. Even within the same time period, social context contributes to differences in the meaning of behavior. Thus, understanding the ecology of SPD, which includes history and culture as described earlier, is as important as understanding the outcomes of the process.

RESEARCHING SPD

The concepts presented so far have emphasized the psychological aspects of SPD, but also suggest that context, ecology, roles, and socialization play central roles in the creation of activists. In our interviews of African American activists 16–35 years old we sought to better understand how these aspects of experience influenced their development. We will use their words to illustrate many of the preceding concepts. Note that the purpose of these quotes is not to present a systematic set of research findings or verify our theoretical propositions. Our intent is to illustrate our approach to theorizing about SPD.

Participants

The quotes that follow were drawn from interviews the first and second authors conducted with 24 activists of African descent in New York City,

Chicago, and the San Francisco Bay area. Older activists, scholars, journalists, and senior members of various social-change organizations in these and other cities nominated participants. The researchers recruited additional participants from conferences and presentations hosted by national organizations and universities that featured young activists. Our definition of “activist” was flexible in that working within the existing political system (e.g., in city government) or not personally resonating with the term activist despite fulfilling our definition, did not automatically exclude people from participation but the criteria for inclusion was always consistent with that presented earlier in this paper. Sampling was a combination of repeated nomination, snowball, and a stratification scheme aimed at covering a range of ideologies and settings: Black nationalist, revolutionary nationalist, progressive, Communist, reform (e.g., NAACP), community organizations (e.g., community development corporations), and progressive human service organizations. The research procedure and instruments were reviewed and approved by the senior author’s human participants research committee.

Procedure

The formal interview schedule consisted of 96 questions, if all documented subquestions and probes in the final revision are included. The major question categories were (1) current work and its origins and precursors, (2) personal background and upbringing, (3) networks and organizations of significance to the respondent, and (4) worldview and ideology. Not every question was asked of every respondent if the person provided the needed information in response to a previous question. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for conducting the audiotaped interviews, which lasted up to 1.5 hr on each of 2–4 sessions. All the interviews were transcribed, which yielded approximately 189,000 words or about 380 pages. The data were computerized for analysis with NVivo (Version 1.1), a software program developed exclusively for processing qualitative data.

TOWARD A TRANSACTIONAL AND ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SPD

In this section we will describe some of the general influences of the data on our thinking about SPD. Perhaps the most salient effect has been the greater weight we now give to contextual factors. Although

many respondents talked about their evolving critical consciousness, it soon became clear that the psychological dynamics of SPD in our initial stage theory did little to capture the role that settings, roles, and specific experiences played in their development. This led us to explore an expansion of the stage theory to include a more ecological and transactional perspective.

One feature of the transactional approach is the use of events as a unit of analysis. Altman and Rogoff (1987) define transactions as “holistic entities” composed of “aspects” rather than separate parts or elements. These aspects are mutually defining, and their temporal qualities are intrinsic features. They go on to say, “Because social actions occur in the context of prior actions and have implications for future actions, the understanding of events requires attention to dynamic and emergent processes that are not wholly predictable from separate knowledge of the setting or its participants” (p. 28). Because our respondents often told us stories about their insights and experiences, we explored memorable experiences as a unit of analysis. We adopted an ecological view on the confluence of the psychological and environmental features in these experiences. In our view, a single transaction may or may not be definitive in a person’s SPD and his or her future attitudes, feelings, or behavior. Nonetheless, the transactions people choose to share over multiple interviews are at least a subset of those that made a meaningful contribution to their development *as they see it*. Privileging the respondents’ perceptions this way means that our research approach is phenomenological—the respondent rather than the researcher makes the causal attributions and establishes meaning. Although this approach respects the perspective of the respondent, it is subject to distortion due to gaps in recall, reticence about self-disclosure, a desire to project a certain image to the interviewer or the respondent herself or himself, and so on. We attempted to compensate for this by coding only those transactions with an identifiable link to SPD as judged by the researchers. Then we looked for thematic patterns across respondents and for confirmation in existing theory.

We used the term “experience venues” to classify the transactions we identified. The major venues that evolved from the analysis roughly corresponded to three developmental periods: upbringing (approximately through high school), which includes family, school, neighborhood, and community groups, was one of these; organizations and institutions of higher education, which are typically part of

late adolescence and early adulthood and later, constituted another. Although our sample did not include activists in their forties and beyond, the experiences of some of the older respondents hinted that adult venues—experiences in occupational, family, educational, and the like—are associated with continuing growth and development and may constitute a third venue. To account for the psychological and social aspects of SPD that seemed less a function of a particular setting (e.g., a nationally publicized event such as the killing of an unarmed citizen by the police) we also included thematic categories called events, sociopolitical insight, and self. The self category includes personal attributes of empathy, spirituality, emotional responses, motivations, and the like when linked to SPD.

To illustrate what we mean by venues and transactions in SPD, we will give examples from each. Again, these are not a verification of our emerging theory; they only serve to make the notion of venues and the dynamics of SPD clearer and less abstract. In the upbringing venue, respondents often described how adult caretakers modeled activism:

My maternal grandmother was more along the lines of your sort of community leader. She had taught Sunday school at my church where I was raised in a Baptist church for about 60 years. She lived to be about 91. [She] started teaching Bible class . . . at some point and so that was one piece, and she was very active in the NAACP, she participated in the elections constantly although she wasn’t a radical by any stretch of the imagination, she was quite militant for her time. . . . We didn’t have a lot of money, we had a lot of education, we had a lot of skills—you had a fundamental responsibility to do something. You could not see something going wrong and not do something about it. So, my mother was sort of a radical 60’s [person].

The following is an example of how early experience in organizations shaped the thinking of young activists. It also illustrates how the awareness of inequity as described in the stage theory of SPD can play a role in an activist’s thinking:

I saw the difference between my neighborhood and my high school friend’s neighborhood. I knew it had to be something to it; I just couldn’t figure out all it was. Then I joined the NAACP and I began to learn about stuff. Matter of fact, I was fourteen when I did my first press conference on infant mortality at Markham Hospital right here. They spent time teaching us about infant mortality and what it was and the impacts . . .

Connections between Afrocultural values, such as collective responsibility, and activism could not be

limited to any one venue. Instead, it seemed best to think of it as a characteristic of venues that in some instances (presumably through socialization and enculturation) become a part of the self:

I feel [a] strong sense of responsibility, and I like being able to meet my responsibilities as a human being on this planet. The work is grueling and difficult. There are no personal rewards. It's not something that's likeable in that respect as to the actual tasks themselves. But the outcomes and knowing that you are at least in a small way attempting to meet your responsibilities to your community and to the entire community is a feeling that is likeable.

The potential importance of adult venues like family in SPD is illustrated in the following:

[In] any activist's life different things motivate them. I think it was mostly self-reflective particularly when I was really young. You know just looking at myself and feeling like that were many people responsible for me being where I am and I owe them. I have an obligation to them. And to fulfill that obligation I may not have to do something for them specifically or directly but to at least continue to work or to do for others. As a mother, my motivation is totally different. Now I see my obligation to the future generation, my own child, and I'm motivated by their need for me to change the world to make it make affable to them. So at different stages in your life different things motivate you and the obligation to the future generations for me has been the most profound motivation because it brings a sense of urgency.

A transactional approach is based on a notion of cumulative effects. The circumstances of one transaction (e.g., events, insights, actions, influences, and attitudes) shape subsequent thinking and behavior and thereby decrease or increase the likelihood of experiencing or creating certain future transactions. The effects of an antecedent transaction can lead to a range of new options for behaviors and attitudes, some more likely than others. The following quote illustrates how a set of memorable transactions might lead to new insights and behavior and in turn to new options for future transactions:

... We had workshops on different issues that were going on around the world. It was the first time that I really began to realize that oppression was happening everywhere. You know that there was really suffering throughout Africa, throughout Latin America, throughout Europe that this was a worldwide phenomenon and started to make those connections. I started to see, you know, I met kids, I developed strong relationships with kids from all over the country and realized that they were struggling in their own communities ... it began to broaden my awareness

that there are people all over the world struggling against oppression. And we did community service projects together, so we did the collective work and things of that sort. And so I came back from that experience in California like ready to get involved in New York. And so I started going and visiting all these different youth organizations that I knew and had heard of ... And so me and some other kids created what we called The United Youth Network and we literally, it was youth led.

A well-developed transactional approach suggests that the branching process from one transaction to another becomes extremely complex and tree-like, but it may be possible to classify a series of transactions into a smaller number of trajectories based on common themes. For example, in our sample there were activists who might be classified into city government, human services, and community organizing trajectories. Alternatively, trajectories might be defined by a respondent's political ideology—Black Nationalist, Republican, or Communist trajectories. In Fig. 1 we offer an example of how a trajectory might be constructed, based on a transactional approach to the data. The upper series of transactions was (de)constructed from the quote above, and the lower series was fictionalized to illustrate an alternative trajectory. This simplified example does not do justice to the complexity of many potential outcomes stemming from one point of action and reflection.

Again, we caution the reader that the intent of this presentation is to illustrate the heuristic value of a transactional approach for community psychology theorizing and research. It is not the only meaningful way to understand SPD, but it is consistent with the field's emphasis on person–environment fit. An eco-transactional approach also provides insights useful in the enhancement of settings. In this instance, it may provide ideas for the enhancement of settings that promote SPD.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to make a case that the concepts of oppression, liberation, and SPD should be at the center and not the margin of community psychology. We considered concepts and theories relevant to this aim and then broadened our perspective on SPD by looking at the process from a transactional and ecological perspective. To help illustrate this broadened approach to SPD we drew examples from interviews of young African American activists. Although the data collection in this study is ongoing,

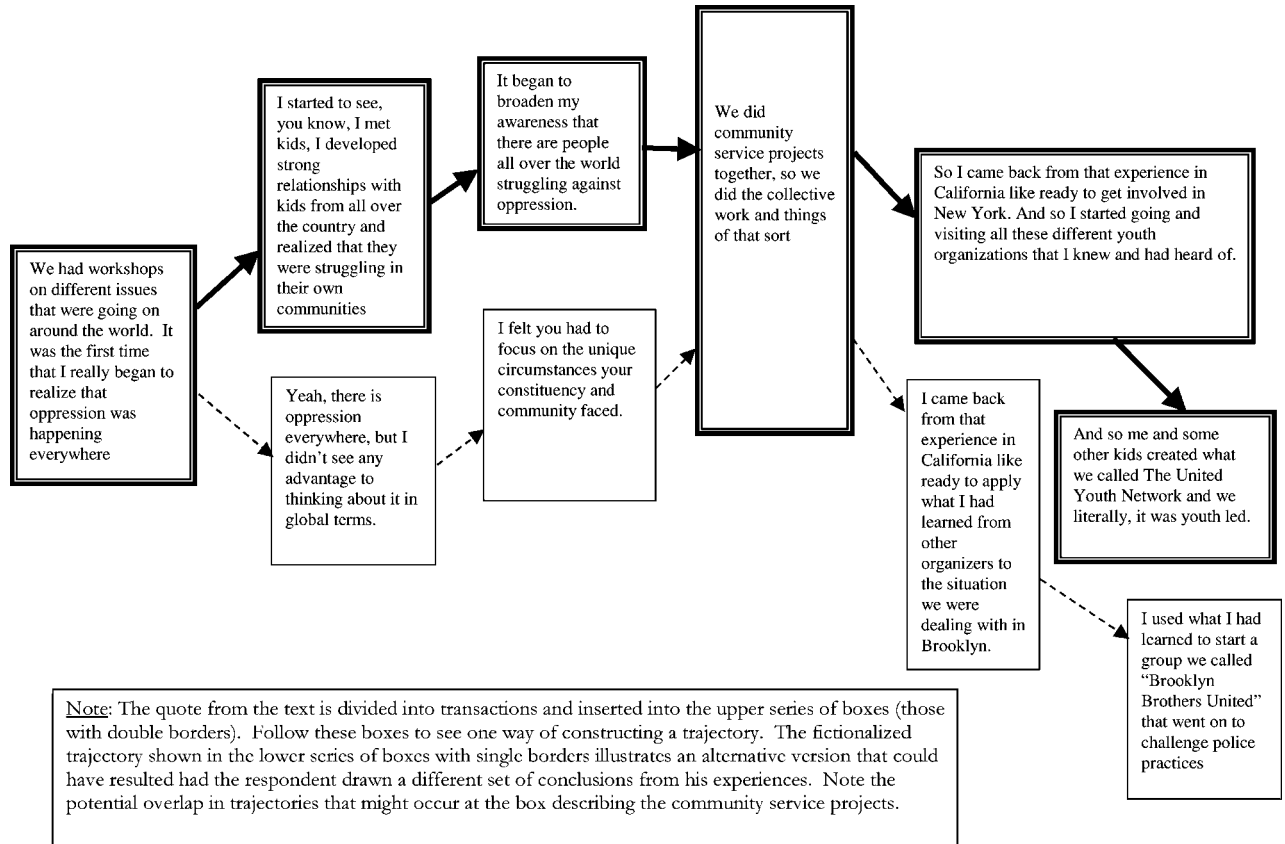


Fig. 1. An illustration of a transactional approach to creating trajectories of sociopolitical development.

we believe that a highly linear and cognitive conception of SPD as suggested in Table I neglects some of the complexity of SPD, especially the role of organizations and other venues. Community psychologists are well equipped to think about the creation and enhancement of settings (e.g., Sarason, 1972), and so a theory that more clearly incorporates these ecological features is an advantage for the field.

The ecological perspective stresses the role of settings and their social dynamics, and like the ecological principle of “succession” it hints at a developmental process as well. Transactions are a way of understanding growth as a response to successive life experiences. From this perspective, SPD is a cumulative and recursive process where future transactions are guided and given meaning by previous ones, and future ones can alter the interpretation of past ones. Moreover, each transaction is a unique situation; it is a combination of an experience venue, aspects of the self, social influences, significant events, and functioning in an organizational role. Although SPD has a psychological

aspect, its social and organizational aspects warrant comparable emphasis. One way to view SPD is as a cumulative effect of many transactions over time that increase sociopolitical understanding (insight and ideology) and the capacity for effective action (liberation behavior).

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

It would be premature to argue now for a specific theory of SPD, much less to advocate a specific course of action for practitioners. It is more prudent to call for a critique of interventions with oppressed populations. The questions to ask in this critique echo the recurring themes in this paper: Do our interventions help participants gain insight into the societal and historical forces that affect their lives, or do we distort and truncate these dynamics to their immediate personal and interpersonal effects? Do our interventions

create a firewall between the political, the cultural, and the psychosocial? Do our interventions support resistance and build skills for collective action on common concerns? *The fundamental question is, do we acknowledge oppression in the lives of those we work with, and do we play a constructive, collaborative role in a liberation process?* Our advice to practitioners is the same as we give ourselves: Develop critical consciousness and a vision for liberation in league with like-minded associates. Cultivate these social networks as a resource for gaining sociopolitical insight on the historical context and social implications of our theory, research, and practice. The emerging theory presented here suggests that SPD cannot advance without the synergy of action and reflection, which means that our work must include a social action component if our overall development is to advance.

For future research, we see three broad areas of inquiry. The first and most obvious is continued empirical work that uses multiple methods for furthering our understanding of SPD. The second area of inquiry was entirely neglected in this paper—the SPD of people who, by virtue of their population membership, derive privilege and benefits from the oppression of others (e.g., White skin, male sex, elite social class, or heterosexual orientation). History provides examples of people who reject their privilege and become an ally to those who are oppressed (e.g., Segrest, 1994), but this paper does not address that process. Any hope for the formation of alliances across the divide of oppression requires that the beneficiaries of privilege first critically analyze their status and attend to their own SPD. Also, because men, Whites, heterosexuals, and so on can simultaneously have other population memberships that subject them to varying degrees of oppression, the dynamics of “layered identities” is an unavoidable but unexplored reality of SPD.

The third area of inquiry is part of moving SPD from the margins of community psychology to its center. This involves empirical work that demonstrates SPD’s relationship to other outcomes of interest and expanding current conceptions of empowerment. For example, the work of Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles, and Maton (1999) is moving in this direction. They found that a high level of *sociopolitical control* (beliefs about one’s capabilities and efficacy in social and political systems) was associated with fewer negative mental health outcomes, including perceived helplessness. Similarly, the work of Potts (this issue) shows the powerful educational, sociopolitical, and psychosocial benefits young African Americans gain

when he and his associates created a school setting that emphasizes liberatory Africentric ideas and action. The work of community psychologists and others outside of the United States we mentioned earlier have already demonstrated that liberation psychology can be of great benefit to our discipline and our societies at large. It is time to use what we know now as we strive to learn more.

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