Activist Support as a Form of Critical Psychology Praxis

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Abstract

Critical psychologists are often asked how they 'do psychology' differently in light of their critical perspectives. One way of doing this is to accompany organizations and groups connected to progressive social movements in hopes of making their work more effective. This article summarizes a multi-year project to develop a prototype for small activist support 'collectives'. A group of six activists with various forms of counseling or group process experience met weekly for two hours for three years to develop principles and practices for 'circle groups'. Our experience was that such groups can serve as the basis for personal self-care and support as well as for 'consultation' to other movement-related organizations that are experiencing difficulties in their group process. We also convened several community conversations where careful meeting design and facilitation was necessary because of strong feelings around certain topics, such as the economic crisis or ecological degradation. Our current project that offers a less intensive hybrid 'drop-in' circle group is also described. Finally, some suggestions are offered, and questions are raised, about how circle groups can be supported by critical psychologists, and about critical psychology's potential to contribute critically to these and related practices.

Keywords: critical psychology, praxis, activist support

As a university professor who has been advocating for critical psychology in one form or another for three decades (Sloan, 1996, 2000), I have often been asked by students what forms of practice follow from the standpoint of critical psychology. How would diagnosis and assessment, or therapy and counselling, be different? I explain that many critical psychologists (in contrast to radical therapists outside of academia who have been inventing practices to address the emotional consequences of alienation in capitalist society) have focused on the *critique* aspect of critical psychology, hammering away against mainstream psychology's individualism, objectification, and ideological collusion with capitalist patriarchy (see Parker, 1999 for a helpful overview). This has been effective in maintaining small spaces within academic psychology for rethinking its theoretical foundations in ways inspired by social movements and critical social theory (usually based on poststructuralism or the critical hermeneutics of the late Frankfurt School). But, looking back, it appears we may have been trying in vain to dismantle the intellectual and ideological foundations of the psy-complex with verbal catapults against its nearly impermeable walls. In other words, it is very hard for anyone lodged in the mainstream to hear what we have been saying. I sometimes think our energies might have been more productively spent by building the crit-psy movement in the shell of the old system, whether it was crumbling or not, by simply 'doing psychology' differently in the classroom, in research practice, in therapy, and, as I am suggesting here, in conjunction with political organizing. Some critical psychology colleagues have been blazing paths in these domains (Prilleltensky and Nelson, 2002; Parker, 2007; Fox, 2011), and there is also a lot of talk about advocacy as a secondary role for counsellors and psychologists (e.g., Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010), but in

practice the latter usually does not go beyond direct or indirect advocacy for clients. Concerted action to address the systematic causes of suffering is rare.

About ten years ago I left academia to devote my energies to political organizing and international development work. I thought I would never return, but I was back four years later a little bit wiser. Apart from learning how hard it is to make a lateral career move like that in mid-life (that is, I did not find a way to make a living in either sector), I learned that, just like academia, political organizing and NGO work are also plagued by what we might call psychosocial challenges. Prominent among these challenges are poorly facilitated meetings with unclear agendas, disruptive and difficult persons who are not 'managed' adequately, lack of clarity and consensus about vision and strategy, limited accountability for failure of volunteers or staff to follow through on tasks, and confusion around authority and decision making processes. The result seems to be that progressive and radical left movements are less coherent and less effective than they could be, while progressive NGOs mostly struggle for funding and lose vision and creativity, and work in both sectors is definitely much less enjoyable for all involved. So, idealistic newcomers routinely show up ready to work, inspired by just causes and values such as equity, freedom, peace, and harmony with the rest of nature, and give their all for a few months or years, while their motivation is systematically eroded. The psychosocial challenges I listed eventually take their toll and would-be lifelong activists/workers usually either fade away disillusioned and burnt out, or hang on spewing cynicism and poisoning the idealism of newcomers.

As a point of clarification, in North America, the term activist is used in a broad sense, to include anyone who acts consciously within or beyond their work and leisure time roles to bring about change in cultural, political, or economic practices. Activism can occur in grassroots organizations, neighbourhood associations, advocacy campaigns, non-profit organizations (NGOs), cooperatives, co-housing and intentional communities, schools and universities, and official political parties and sects. (At the end of this article, I have included a sampling of books designed to educate activists about being effective organizers, taking care of themselves, etc.) Given that public education in the USA is usually very weak in preparing us as citizens – mostly inculcating some vague notions about our responsibility to participate in elections as our primary form of citizenship – very few of us have thought much about what it would take to bring about significant structural changes in society. As a result, most activism focuses on single issues and there is very little unity, except perhaps in spirit, among progressive and radical projects. The left is extremely fragmented. And in the absence of a strong progressive movement, the Democratic Party keeps caving in to the center. Third parties are hampered by various structural and ideological factors from gaining significant support. The few individuals who do manage to become 'politicized' have few places to turn for effective engagement besides, for example, local campaigns to address police brutality, environmental destruction, cuts in education and health services, or immigrant rights.

This disarray on the North American left could not come at a worse time. Most political writing we see assesses the world situation as being more critical than ever due to the possibility that climate change and ecological destruction will end life on earth and, along with 'peak oil', would definitely produce economic chaos and violence on our way there. Some activists are giving up hope, while others see a fresh opportunity to capitalize on the crisis and potential system collapse by organizing ecologically sustainable and socially just local communities. In such a context, it

may be worth remembering Gramsci's motto advocating pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. By character, I tend to be optimistic and have been excited about the possibilities of bringing insights from critical psychology into the sphere of activism for about a decade now, and present such efforts here as an example of what some in the USA are calling 'engaged scholarship' – an attempt to make academic research as directly relevant to community needs as possible. I nevertheless expect some scepticism from my critical psychology colleagues about what I describe here, partly because they are good at asking tough questions and partly because this work is not adequately theorized. I ask a few of these tough questions myself at the end of this article.

Here I would like to describe what we have been doing to bring a critical psychology perspective into more direct contact with the social movements of our times by accompanying activists in their struggles. In 2005, Psychologists for Social Responsibility (www.psysr.org) sponsored the "Beyond Talk" conference to help psychologists and counsellors pick up tools for activism. This was well-received, but may have had things backwards. Psychologists and counsellors are some of the hardest to mobilize for political work, given their focus on individuals. Perhaps, instead, activists need some of the tools that counsellors and psychologists tend to learn in their training: self-care, group process, emotional validation, and conflict resolution, for example. So, a few years ago, following on discussions at a 2007 conference on 'Psychology, Ecology, and Sustainability' at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, a group of experienced activists from various sectors began to meet regularly to experiment with a prototype of an 'activist dialogue and support group'.

In our first few meetings, we addressed questions such as:

> Why do people who have such goodwill and desire to change the world struggle so hard to work together, and to keep doing the work? What skills would we need to be able to able to address personality conflicts, organizational struggles, and questions of leadership, hierarchy, accountability and transparency? How can we balance the urgency to act with the need to have quality process that builds sustainable relationships? How can we maintain our longevity rather than succumb to burnout, conflict and fragmented energy? How do we maintain a balance between engagement and self-care and restoration? [text taken from internal documentation]

After a few transitional formations including more people and meeting less often, a group of six of us began meeting weekly for two hours and did so for almost three years. We saw ourselves as a non-hierarchical collective aimed at supporting our own work as activists as well as participating in projects or 'consultations' that might help other groups, organizations, or communities. We called ourselves "A Circle Group" – a play on the circle A symbol for anarchism. We thought of this as a collective because we very consciously subscribed to non-hierarchical practices, consensus decision making, mutual aid, etc as are typical of the anarchist tradition (Milstein, 2010; Vanucci & Singer, 2010).

The basic format that emerged for our meetings was as follows:

- Check-ins: Each person takes a few minutes to share anything important that is going on at emotional, interpersonal, organizational, and worldview levels. Mention any items for further discussion during the meeting.
- Construction of agenda based on priorities. (5 minutes)
- Dialogue on agenda items (60-75 minutes)

- Check out: Each person takes an additional few minutes to reflect on the meeting's process, impact, and content, and express what they are taking away from it.
- Determine next meeting time.

Occasionally we wrote about what we were experiencing in A Circle Group, with hopes of disseminating this form we were finding so helpful to us. Here's one excerpt from our self-documentation about a year into the project.

> What we do is simple: each week, we meet for two hours. We practice naming our emotions and our experiences; we tell each other, honestly, about the experiences we are having in our lives and in our groups and networks, and we ask for help from each other. What kind of help? Sometimes we ask each other to listen. Sometimes we ask people to give us suggestions about how we might have behaved differently in a given scenario, what kind of language we could have used to better communicate what we were trying to say. Sometimes we ask for insight about power relationships and group dynamics—we rely on the collective experiences of group members to give us insight into situations, and call attention to our blind spots. Sometimes we talk about our own emotions in the work we are doing. Frequently, we ask for, and give each other support—we remind each other of the priorities we have set, and gently ask each other if we are getting off track. We remind ourselves that we will continue to make mistakes, and that we can go back to people we have hurt, and take the risk of asking how we might behave differently next time.
>
> The "work" is, really, practice. We practice each week in a small group, listening carefully to each other, honoring our differences, and asking for what we need. We have found that the group meetings sustain us in our work, have helped us build trust and support for each other, and helped us to practice naming our emotions in real time, in a safe space. We have found that this work translates into our work in other spaces—we are able to name our feelings, even in a conflict; we are able to slow down and be a bit less reactive in conflict; we are able to say things out loud that, before, we would have said to other people rather than the person who really needed to be addressed.

So it went week after week, with topics and themes ranging from founder syndromes to accountability processes, from sexuality to ideology theory. On a few occasions serious misunderstandings created uncomfortable tension, so we had to devote subsequent sessions to working through those issues as best we could.

After many months of meeting, we realized that we really knew very little about each other's lives prior to meeting each other, since our discussions tended to focus on current issues. We decided to devote some time to learning about each other's pasts and linked that process to a sort of individual consultation on strategy, focus, etc. Over a few weeks, each member took about an hour to share a brief life story (family life, schooling, early interests, political socialization, etc) and then articulated current dilemmas in light of past experience. For example, in my case, after I told the story of my childhood, youth, education, and work as an adult, the group helped me pinpoint a contradiction I routinely experience (subliminally) between my white middle-class 'subject position' and my academic knowledge regarding oppression, exploitation, and suffering, both in the USA and in Latin America. Even though we spent fairly few of our hundreds of hours overtly on life story telling, we got to know each other very well just from our weekly check-ins.

I personally felt sustained by my participation in A Circle Group in several ways. First, it provided a place where I could talk through complex interconnections between my emotional patterns and my ideas about where to put my political energies. I made decisions about which groups or projects were effective and meaningful enough to continue working with, and which I should disconnect from or try to transform. Second, while going through a long transition in my personal life, I had five activist-friends who reminded me to have compassion for myself, take the breaks I needed, and focus on my own previously stated priorities. Third, I came to understand the complexities of five other activists in their psychopolitical struggles and learned

lessons from their experiences vicariously. In each of these ways, I felt 'connected' deeply in ways that modern forms of living do not usually afford outside kinship or romantic relations.

We did not only attend to our own needs, however. When the economic crisis hit the United States in the fall of 2008, we saw an opportunity to extend our little support structure to others who might be concerned about how to respond to what looked like it could be a full-scale depression like 1929. We, as a collective, put out a call through the non-profit and radical organizing sectors for a meeting with the slogan "Don't worry – let's organize our communities" prominently featured on flyers and announcements. A couple of weeks later a hundred people, mostly activists and grassroots community organizers, showed up and earnestly participated in a process we had designed to help people connect to each other and move from despair and worry to action. Quite a few in the group had already lost jobs or had hours cut, and were fearful of economic hard times. A month later seventy came back for a second session of sharing of feelings, information on projects, and resources.

Here I want to share the part of this "Don't worry" project that is most relevant to a psychological audience. We felt it embodied some practices that are usually ignored in community organizing because it gave ample time to those present for sharing feelings related to the political-economic situation, to know each other as individuals, and to feel a sense of community develop before their eyes. As part of the process we asked small groups to brainstorm on what they have experienced as hindrances or supports for community building. They came up with this list (which I will leave unedited, while realizing that some of this will not make sense out of context):

Notes from discussion of what helps and hurts community building and effective organizing

Obstacles

- Not having well defined roles
- Started working on solution before clarifying problem
- People still in dominant mindset
- Taking power from other's weakness
- Tunnel vision
- Unconstructive interference
- Indifference
- Being contrarian
- Alpha personalities/Ego competition, attached to outcomes
- Maintaining inspiration after an inspiring event (throughout your daily life)
- Encountering people who are close minded

Solutions

- Empathy
- Ask people what they would like to do
- Listening
- Sharing without judgment
- Learn through conflict
- Good facilitation

- Ongoing meetings in a neutral space
- Redirect
- Ground rules
- Group snuggles
- Info on organizational structure
- Enough time
- ‘Open Space’ model
- Accept/explore differences
- Speak simply
- Small group networks/ Affinity Groups
- Sociocracy model
- Commitment
- Food at meetings

During our second session we asked them to brainstorm on what helps create distrust or trust in group work. These are the lists they came up with.

Trust Exercise Reportback

I don't trust groups that....

- lack transparency
- have no love
- have singular demographics
- lie
- have hidden agenda
- have too much silence
- dominate
- offer no validation of feeling
- allow put-down
- externalize problems
- have too much faith in one personalities
- have no goals
- have no humor
- have narrow perspective
- are too serious
- are drunk during meetings
- have unclear purpose
- don't accept criticism
- are bureaucratic
- claim moral high ground
- have no process for discussions
- does processes too much
- have too rigid of organizational structure
- have insiders/outsiders mentality
- lack humility

I trust a group that

- has high productivity
- is democratic
- attends to relations/emotions
- has diversity in leadership
- works with other groups
- is willing to go as slow as the slowest member of group
- shares ideas
- optimistic
- has space to work out conflicts
- supports personal growth
- has juice that comes from love and celebration not stress and fear
- sings and celebrates
- is self-reflective
- is cooperative
- is full of people who care and unity
- acknowledges different styles
- has specific outcomes/goals
- values inclusion
- has balanced perspective

I share these lists in order to show how people tend know what helps groups be successful, but, obviously, we don't always remember to keep these things in mind in designing and running meetings, or participating in them. In particular, in the region where I work, we keep learning (again and again) that celebration, connection, art and spirit, food, concrete tasks such as building, and physical movement are very important in sustaining interest and commitment.
In the final year of A Circle Group's meetings, we held a day-long retreat and decided to take a turn away from engagement with other groups and the larger community for a while. It seemed that each of us had reached a point where we needed to attend to livelihood and relationship issues that we had put on the shelf. The circle provided a warm and understanding space for each of us to talk through our plans for change knowing that the others could understand and give meaningful feedback, while maintaining our fundamental orientation toward participation in social change. This was probably critical to maintaining effective engagement in other spheres of our lives during those months.

After three years of consistent meeting, the A Circle Group decided to disband so its members could go on to share what we had learned with others and turn attention to other projects. My first attempt at sharing what I had learned – working with a new collective known as the Cascadia Center (tryonfarm.org/cc) – was to find a co-facilitator and put out the following notice to the non-profit and radical activist sectors on calendars and email lists:

> **Invitation to a Drop-in 'Circle Group' for Activists, Organizers, and Change Agents**
>
> Need a boost in your work for social change? Want to check in with others about a strategy you are considering? Worried that you are burning out? Sensing contradictions in your life and work that need

> some attention? Wondering how to improve process in your group? Want to help support others by listening and sharing ideas?
>
> The Cascadia Center, an initiative supported by Tryon Life Community Farm, draws on principles of social ecology to offer a space for addressing these needs and issues in a bi-monthly open circle group. Whether you are based in a grassroots organization, a non-profit, a co-op, a union, or a collective, we are hoping you will find this space useful. Hosted by members of the collective that organizes Cascadia Center offerings, a typical meeting lasts about an hour and a half with social time before and after. We begin with agreements about confidentiality and how we will speak and listen to each other. Then we do check-ins and invite suggestions for topics to address. We then assess which of these are most pressing and start working on them. After an hour or more, we check out and mingle a bit. Note: We hope this will be just one of many spaces around the city where circle groups will be meeting. Let us know if you'd like help with organizing a circle group in your neighborhood.
>
> Dates and Times: First and third Mondays for April, May and June, 5:30 - 6:45 pm. Come on whatever days you can, but try to be on time.

The response was underwhelming but sufficient to test this format. Here are my brief notes from one of the gatherings that ensued:

> 8 people in attendance, great variety, three new participants (a director of a disabilities service org, a youngish anarchist, an elder union activist, an experienced grassroots climate change activist, a teacher, a worker in an agency serving the homeless)

Initial issues mentioned in check-ins:

> Divisiveness and hierarchy issues in human service org, workers don't have voice.
> Impossibility of living a balanced life given the urgency that is typical of activist culture
> Manager feeling underappreciated for all she does, also trying to share responsibility with her staff, but they won't take it
> Wondering what helps keep people active
> How can we rethink activism and be more effective?
> Reasons why we quibble among ourselves - is it because we think we will not win in the end?
>
> We ended up discussing most of these further, and once again came to a point where we had some compassion for ourselves in light of feeling like little islands in the stormy sea of capitalist patriarchy.

Having now facilitated eight of these drop-in dialogue groups and also drawing on the three years of A Circle Group work, these are some of the things I think can be safely said about activist support:

Many activists are isolated, self-doubting, confused, depleted, and lacking perspective on how their own actions may be contributing to a group's ineffectiveness. To some extent, they join groups to get needs met that have little to do with the project at hand. It is important to attend to those needs, which are simply the usual human needs for connection, recognition, validation, and meaning.

But circle groups can provide more than simple connection. They can provide spaces where personal missions and group strategies are clarified in dialogue with others, where emotional well-being and relationships in the work are monitored, where challenging ways of communicating can be tested, where trust can be built, and where ideas for organizing can emerge. All of this creates rare spaces in which horizontal, non-hierarchical modes of work can be practiced, prefiguring the sort of society we are supposedly trying to bring into being (Milstein, 2010). Some of this work actually overlaps with what the psy-complex purports to do

as it tries to foster mental health and well-being, but of course fails in the project due its instrumentalist and objectifying approach. In the case of activist support groups, we engage people where they are and offer them safe spaces in which they can move from alienation and neurotic isolation toward participation and even 'leadership' in fairly direct connection with the movements they care about.

I would not be surprised if some readers are now asking, Where is the critical psychology in all of this? How are these circle groups any different from standard support groups that are common for addressing all sorts of problems that people share (alcoholism, grief, etc)? I see it like this: One way to describe the aim of critical psychology is say that it attempts to move within and against the domain designated as "psychology" in order to reduce human suffering due to unjust social relations and to foster modes of living characterized by mutuality, respect, equity, etc. Circle groups and other forms of activist support/training have the potential to bring these desirable conditions right into the heart of the movements that seek to establish egalitarian relations more broadly in society and the economy. Indeed, some of the principles and practices that shape the work of circle groups do not look very different from progressive group work done in the domains of self-help, social work, or intentional communities, but those practices already reflect to some extent a commitment to deeper democracy. Circle groups go the next step and link support directly to the heart of social movements.

Nevertheless, there are many areas in which people informed by critical psychology and critical theory in general might help to advance practice in light of theory and vice versa. These are some of the tough questions that can be asked, and I look forward to hearing others:

- *Is the potential of dialogue as a de-ideologizing process fully exploited in circle groups and similar formats? Isn't there a tendency to accept each other as we are, to avoid pushing each other too hard or contradicting each other? How can we open up possibilities for moving beyond what a group takes for granted or comes to consensus on?*
- *Isn't there a problem with focusing so much on face-to-face verbal communication? How could circle groups include the arts broadly speaking: imagery, movement, music, play, ritual?*
- *Are circle groups really a key part of preparation for radical action that might shake the foundations of oppressive systems or are they mostly just a way of hunkering down and nurturing each other while waiting for cracks in the system to develop sufficiently?*
- *For good reasons, circle groups close themselves off to new members after attendance stabilizes and commitments to participate are secured. What happens to those who are left out? How can circle groups self-replicate more easily? What about those who cannot participate easily because of language barriers or time constraints?*
- *Some organizers who may need support and a space to reflect on their work would not be prone to look for it in an intimate group. Do other forms of practice exist for sustaining such people?*

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