Building Community: Theoretical Psychology in the Service of Social Issues

Preface

Basia D. Ellis, James Cresswell, Gordana Jovanović, Mary Beth Morrissey

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Welcome to the much-anticipated second volume of the International Review of Theoretical Psychologies (IRTP). This issue reflects the vibrant dialogues that unfolded at the 2022 conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP), virtually hosted by the the University of Sacramento, USA, with Basia D. Ellis as the local organizer. As an open-access online journal, IRTP publishes carefully crafted and peer-reviewed articles that emerge from ISTP conferences and other activities linked to the society. With a biennial publication schedule aligned with the conference themes, this volume showcases the intellectual richness of the latest ISTP conference, themed "Building Community: Theoretical Psychology in the Service of Social Issues."

The theme, conceived in 2019, aimed to explore how theoretical psychology can contribute to an 'engaged' psychological program that directly addresses the needs of diverse communities and the complexities of contemporary social issues. Observing marked social upheaval in the public sphere, as well as increasingly hostile and unequal global conditions, social scientists have turned to direct work with communities, governments, and organizations. Universities, too, have embraced interdisciplinary collaborations, fostering 'community-engaged' approaches that call upon researchers to forge partnerships and drive positive social change.

Notably, theoretical psychologists have for decades actively engaged and further developed critical, feminist, hermeneutic, sociocultural, phenomenological, postcolonial, and other frameworks to question, investigate, and reframe scientific knowledge to engage ethically and critically with others to address social issues. Accordingly, conference attendees were invited to consider these and related developments, exploring further avenues to catalyze

positive social outcomes, enhance research-community collaborations, and extend their impact beyond disciplinary confines.

In 2020, the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the ISTP Executive to initially postpone the conference to 2021 and subsequently transition it to a fully online format in 2022, given the persistent international travel restrictions and safety considerations. Consequently, we observed a decrease in conference attendance, with just over 100 attendees compared to the typical range of 250-300, along with a reduction in the number of submissions to these proceedings. Despite these adversities, the conference brought together diverse theoretical perspectives from psychology and neighboring disciplines to understand complex social issues, critique existing frameworks, and explore alternatives centered on ethics, democracy, care and social transformation.

The current issue comprises contributions from four keynotes (including their keynote video recordings and corresponding transcripts, with references) as well as three articles that demonstrate the diversity of topics explored during the event. In what follows, we overview major themes from the ISTP conference and elaborate on the articles in this issue. For more information about the conference and links to all recorded sessions please see the ISTP website [https://istp.wildapricot.org/conferences].

Community engagement, empowerment, and social change

Many conference sessions focused on how theoretical psychology could help address pressing social issues, such as social inequality, climate change, and immigration, by focusing on community engagement, collaboration, empowerment, and social change. In her keynote address, Regina Day Langhout examines how youth participatory action research can support the "conscientización" or critical consciousness development of working class and working poor Black, Indigenous, and students of color in elementary schools. Langhout first describes the disempowering nature of typical elementary school contexts in North America, where interventions aimed at systemic change often fail because they are top-down rather than emergent from students' cultures, needs and strengths. She then introduces youth participatory action research as a collaborative approach that democratizes knowledge production and can facilitate more socially just change. Specifically, a participatory action approach emphasizes culture, support, assessing community needs and resources, developing leadership, and shared decision making about work and action. Through a discussion of four participatory action studies, Langhout shows how such an approach facilitates shifts in consciousness that empower youth to gain greater control over conditions affecting their lives.

In his keynote address, Alexander Sidorkin discusses the importance of "relationality" in education, calling for a paradigm shift in education studies to recognize the importance of relational dynamics in educational outcomes and student experiences. Provocatively, Sidorkin describes relationships as the "dark matter" of education—a crucial yet often overlooked aspect that explains why dominant policy efforts, which emphasize standards, testing, and technological innovations, have largely failed to meaningfully improve student outcomes over decades now. According to Sidorkin, this strange inertia reveals how learning's effectiveness depends upon relational dimensions that contemporary reforms neglect. Building on philosophical perspectives that highlight the existential primacy of relationality for human flourishing, Sidorkin conceptualizes classrooms as sites for

sculpting students' emerging "relational selves" across diverse social contexts during maturation. Crucially, nurturing these developmental processes requires cultivating supportive yet challenging, inclusive yet purposeful bonds, attuned to students' evolving needs. To improve educational outcomes, then, Sidorkin advocates for adding relational assessments as a new dimension of accountability to measure classroom climate, student belonging, and developmental support. He concludes by inviting theoretical psychologists to help develop a "relational pedagogy" that pushes the educational field in a new direction, one that is focused on nurturing growth through relationships.

Also examining the education context, in her paper, Johanna Degen discusses how she applied principles from critical community psychology to develop continuing education courses on sex education for teachers in Germany. Noting how teachers in Germany receive little training in sex education and feel overwhelmed navigating charged societal debates on sex education topics, Degen's project sought to build teachers' competence and confidence in this area through an emotion- and value-based course informed by empirical research on teachers' needs. The resulting multimedia course covered topics such as relationships, wellbeing, diversity, pornography, and sexual violence prevention, combining research with guided introspective activities for self-reflection, and practical case studies to enable implementation in schools. Through a discussion of evaluation data, Degen shows how the course not only increased teachers' optimism, skills, and sense of competence regarding sex education, but also contributed to positive personal growth and a better ability to handle complex situations at school. The study in turn points to the ways principles of critical psychology such as embracing multiple paradigms and focusing on participants' strengths can facilitate teachers' professional development.

Decolonizing psychology

A number of conference sessions critiqued the colonial origins and assumptions underlying mainstream psychology and discussed various cultural perspectives and non-Western theories to "decolonize" psychology. This is the central focus of Puleng Segalo's keynote address. Observing how Eurocentric psychological theories often "make strange" the experiences of colonized peoples, alienating them from their indigenous cultures and knowledges, Segalo shows how contextual, participatory approaches that draw upon and revalidate subjugated epistemologies are needed. Further, she argues that a decolonial feminist community psychology is needed to contest dominant assumptions about human behavior and research methodology, as well as to document marginalized narratives and standpoints, including their intersecting matrices of oppression shaped by ongoing coloniality. Segalo exemplifies such an approach through her own work, where she employs the visual methodology of South African women's embroideries to surface undocumented stories and forms of knowledge, facilitating healing dialogues on apartheid's complex trauma.

Marcus Vinícius do Amaral Gama Santos and Arthur Arruda Leal Ferreira in turn discuss the importance of decolonial narratives in the field of history of psychology, using a case study of organizational psychology in Rio de Janeiro. The authors argue that dominant narratives in psychology's history often impose theories and frameworks from foreign—largely English and North American—contexts onto local histories in the Global South. Decolonial narratives actively resist this by prioritizing local sources and specificities. Drawing upon findings from an empirical study of management styles in organizational psychology texts from Rio de Janeiro (1949-1965), the authors show how Nikolas Rose's

framework of disciplinary, ergonomic and entrepreneurial styles is insufficient to account for the Brazilian context—instead, a prevalent "personalist and human relations" style had to be added to capture local specificities. Their discussion elaborates how decolonial narratives contribute to the decolonization of peoples by resisting the imposition of universal frameworks, reclaiming cultural memory, and enabling marginalized voices to speak.

Ordinary objects, experiences, and care practices

Other conference sessions explored everyday life and care, with sessions focused on theorizing mundane objects, ordinary experiences, emotions, embodiment, and care practices. In his illustrative keynote, philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart discusses the importance of the "atmosphere" of psychiatric institutions and therapeutic contexts. He explores how revolutionaries like François Tosquelles sought to dismantle oppressive hierarchies within asylums, breaking down walls, promoting patient inclusion and agency. He then shows how Jean Oury built on this by conceiving psychiatric patients as having sensitive "antennas" attuned to environmental subtleties often imperceptible to clinicians. Likewise, Pelbart notes how Félix Guattari helped expose how institutional environments could enable the production of new, processual subjectivities. According to Pelbart, for all three thinkers, the atmosphere sustained within such spaces was paramount. Building on this work, Pelbart describes his subsequent co-founding of the Ueinzz theatre group that gave voice to those experiencing psychological distress. By spotlighting often socially censured subjectivities, he shows how radical forms of community and solidarity became viable. He argues such micropolitical interventions, opening rifts in the "subjective atmosphere," are essential given our age of generalized "normo-pathy" as they may offer escapes from forces of subjectification imposing psychic enclosure.

Theoretical psychology and technology

A significant number of sessions at the conference grappled with the impacts of recent technological developments—both positive potentials and risks/harms, especially regarding subjectivity, ethics, inequality and democracy. There was also discussion of using technology in creative and empowering ways. Exploring the concept of a "post-truth" era propelled by social media, Patrick Byers and Melanie Jezen challenge this popular notion that society has entered an era where facts and evidence no longer matter. Contrary to this idea, public discourses reveal extensive concern with evaluating truth claims and checking facts. The authors argue that the power of the post-truth concept reflects widening divergence in compelling narrative constructions of reality. Drawing on psychological research on narratives, they distinguish between factual truth and "narrative truth" pertaining to the judged coherence and realism of an account. Building on Wittgenstein and Jerome Bruner, they argue that truth judgements inherently involve social interpretations within cultural frames, not just mapping to a world "out there." Consequently, clashes over "the way things really were" also crucially concern conflicting narrative versions of reality. The authors maintain that recent digital networking technologies have connected dispersed individuals into "mnemonic communities" centered on particular narrative templates. Immersion within such groups explains persistent disagreements as reflecting commitment to divergent socially constructed realities, not just contrary facts. Recognizing this role of narratively mediated truths helps explain "post-truth" era tensions and offers traction in addressing current social polarization.

We hope that the issue will give readers a taste of the range of topics and rich dialogues that characterize the ISTP conference experience! As we also look forward to meeting again soon in Belgrade, Serbia, for the 2024 ISTP conference, we encourage readers to refer to the ISTP website [https://istp.wildapricot.org/conferences] for further details.