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*(De)colonizing Culture in Community Psychology:  
Reflections from Critical Social Science*

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Decolonizing Culture in Community Psychology: Reflections from Critical Social Science

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### Abstract

Since its inception, community psychology has been interested in cultural matters relating to issues of diversity and marginalization. However, the field has tended to understand culture as static social markers or as the background for understanding group differences. In this article the authors contend that culture is inseparable from who we are and what we do as social beings. Moreover, culture is continually shaped by socio-historical and political processes intertwined within the globalized history of power. The authors propose a *decolonizing standpoint* grounded in critical social science to disrupt understandings of cultural matters that marginalize others. This standpoint would move the field toward deeper critical thinking, reflexivity and emancipatory action. The authors present their work to illustrate how they integrate a decolonizing standpoint to community psychology research and teaching. They conclude that community psychology must aim towards intercultural work engaging its political nature from a place of ontological/epistemological/methodological parity.

Key words: culture, colonialism, critical theory, decolonizing standpoint, autoethnography, critical ethnography.

## Decolonizing Culture in Community Psychology: Reflections from Critical Social Science

Community psychology has an expressed commitment to engage culture as a key dimension of community research and action. Several developments reflect the increasing attention that the notion of culture is gaining in community psychology (O'Donnell, 2006). However, calls for fully integrating culture in community psychology are still founded on an implicit premise that should be subjected to critical reflection; that is, “culture” is something out there, external to the field and its practitioners, which can be integrated into community psychology work. On the contrary, we argue that community psychology is a cultural practice and a product. The field is an institutionalized endeavor molded by Western ways of being, knowing and doing (Gridley & Breen, 2007). Most important, as a social science, community psychology is shaped by Western academic traditions, discourses and structures that reproduce historical power hierarchies intertwined with the legacy of colonialism (see Martín-Baró, 1998; Parker, 2007). As the field engages cultural matters more explicitly, particularly in diverse settings, what is required is a critical approach that accounts for the relationship between culture and power.

In this article we bring to bear theorizing from critical social science to propose a *decolonizing standpoint* for understanding culture that we think is vital for deepening emancipatory practices in community psychology. Broadly speaking, critical social science is a normative, practical, ethical and political endeavor. It aims to develop theory and practice that reveals distortions in individual and public discourse and action that serve to maintain systems of oppression. Critical social science engages in “inquiry that fosters enlightened self-knowledge and effective social–political action... it rejects the idea of disinterested social science and emphasizes attending to the cultural and historical conditions on which the theorist’s own

intellectual activity depends” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 46). Thus, critical social science is also a self-reflexive endeavor (Schwandt, 2001; see also Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, 2000).

As critical community psychologists, we are particularly interested in a decolonizing standpoint to culture that can disrupt essentialist understandings of cultural matters that have served historically to marginalize others. This standpoint brings into clearer view ways in which power/privilege/oppression are reproduced and contested through racialized and ethnicized practices and discourses; that is, how social inequality is maintained and challenged through culture. Working from this perspective should lead us to question: What about culture are we trying to understand, to what end, from whose perspective? How does our current understanding of cultural matters in a particular setting help us foreground dynamics of social oppression and liberation?

To lay the groundwork for a critical approach to culture we first consider how community psychology and other fields have explored cultural matters. We then locate the decolonizing standpoint within critical social science, particularly writings on the coloniality of power and knowledge from Latin American and Indigenous perspectives. Next, we present some of our work in diverse settings to show how we integrate critical social theories and methodologies to examine ways in which culture is implicated in the (re)production and contestation of inequality. First, we present critical ethnographic work in a racially and ethnically diverse school district where a colonial mentality permeates discourses about cultural difference and inclusion, masking ethnic and class exclusion. Then we turn to autoethnographic writing to show how a commitment to decolonizing practices is integrated with teaching psychology to mostly white students in ways that challenge the enduring legacy of colonialism at the level of social identities. We conclude by reflecting on the challenges and possibilities a decolonizing standpoint brings to

community psychology. We hope such an endeavor would contribute to a community psychology that is critical, transdisciplinary and intercultural from where we can engage in emancipatory theory, research and action.

### Culture in Community Psychology

Community psychologists have been increasingly aware of the role culture plays in community phenomena. The field has adopted cultural relativity and social diversity as values to uphold (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994; Rappaport, 1977; Sarason, 1974). Several publications in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* (AJCP) and related journals (e.g., *Journal of Community Psychology*) have been dedicated to different topics regarding culture. Some authors have argued for incorporating notions of culture into community psychology understandings of diverse settings (e.g., Trickett, 1996). Others have explored ways in which research and practice in communities can be culturally anchored (Hughes, Seidman & Williams, 1993). Most recently, Harrell and Bond (2007) proposed an articulation of a diversity principle that fosters awareness of culture, power and “self-in-community.” Additionally, some theorists have pushed for interdisciplinary work that deepens community psychology understandings of the complexity of community life including its sociocultural dimensions (Maton, Perkins & Saegert, 2006; Christens & Perkins, 2008; Reich & Reich, 2006). Notwithstanding, the increasing number of articles addressing culture directly, these are exceptions rather than the rule. Methodologically speaking, while the field has embraced alternative research methods such as qualitative interviews and community-based participatory research, studies for the most part continue to be anchored in positivist epistemologies. One is hard pressed to find in AJCP articles that address or use interpretive research methods. For instance, we found only 13 articles that engage ethnographic research and none that use discourse analysis. Thus, as reflected in the published

literature, the field still struggles theoretically and methodologically to see culture in its full complexity.

Culture is not an easy concept to define, and there is no (inter)disciplinary agreement on a single meaning. Although historically the study of culture has been the domain of anthropology, such a disciplinary border has been blurred; the study of culture is now of interest to a variety of disciplines and fields including cross-cultural and cultural psychology, cultural studies, post-colonial studies and community psychology (Ribeiro, 2005; Jahoda & Krewer, 1997; Shweder, 1990; for recent examples of studies in community psychology see Guerra & Knox, 2008; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2008; Gonzales, Germán, Kim, George, Fabrett, Millsap & Dumka, 2008; Roosa, Weaver, White, Tein, Knight, Gonzalez & Saenz, 2009). Broadly speaking, culture is often used to refer to shared values, beliefs, practices, products and norms of social groups (e.g., nation-states, ethnic groups). Other forms and levels of social organization and stratification have also been recognized as “having” a culture. For instance, families, people with disabilities, institutions, corporations, are said to have their own cultures. Griffin (2000; see also Greenfield, 1997) notes that in psychology culture is often seen as the backdrop for engaging with and understanding social practices. Yet in other instances, culture is simply used as a euphemism, a proxy signaling dimensions of social inequality and oppression by way of race, ethnicity and/or class.

Rappaport (2000) asserts that “the language chosen inevitably leads to the nature of interventions developed in exactly the same way that in science and problem solving the way the question is framed predetermines the answers obtained” (p. 109). It is evident that some community psychological understandings of culture seem to draw mainly upon conceptualizations developed by mainstream anthropology and cross-cultural psychology (e.g.,

Dinh, Weinstein, Nemon, & Rondreau, 2008; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2008; O'Donnell, 2006). These inter- and intra-disciplinary conversations are important for expanding the ways in which we understand and engage with human diversity. However, as some have observed (e.g., Harrell & Bond, 2007; Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994; Watts, 1992), there remains a tendency in the field to present culture as “some-thing,” as static, an essence, that exists outside of the observer (i.e., researchers and practitioners).

A rudimentary review of publications in 2008 to 2009 issues of the AJCP reveals few studies (e.g., Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009) that have engaged interpretive approaches to understanding people in context. Yet, most studies still rely on positivist models of knowledge production that position researchers as neutral expert knowers outside the phenomena of study (Dinh, et al., 2008; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2008; Guerra & Knox, 2008; for constructivist perspectives see Ibañez, I., 2001, Gergen, 1996). From our perspective, advances in postcolonial and cultural studies and critical psychology can reposition community psychology's engagement with culture. Such understandings highlight the ways in which social categories emerge, are negotiated and sustained within relations of domination. In this sense, critiques leveled against mainstream approaches to culture in other disciplines also apply to community psychology. If we are to extend theorizing in community psychology to develop deeper understandings of cultural matters, the field must attend to contemporary debates that problematize how culture has been approached by different disciplines.

Bhatia and Ram (2001; also Espiritu, 2003; Griffin, 2000), for instance, have questioned the assumptions that underlie cross-cultural work using the notion of acculturation to illustrate the issues. The acculturation work developed by Berry (1997), among others, presents an ecological model for understanding the cultural and psychological changes that follow ongoing



firsthand contact between different groups. Bhatia and Ram argued that the model assumes a kind of psychic unity of “mankind”, that is, acculturation will take place in the same way for everyone. Little attention is given to the how the distinct histories of colonialism and the ongoing dynamics of oppression and liberation in different (post)colonial contexts shape adaptation to a new society. In some of our own work we have argued that memories of home and experiences of racialized exclusion turn acculturation and identity making into an ongoing process of negotiating power relations within broader social, cultural and economic structures (Sonn, 2002; Reyes Cruz, 2002, 2006). To take Bhatia and Ram’s argument further, the standard against which successful acculturation is assessed is often determined by the dominant group, silencing diversity and dissent within the host society.

Recently, Okazaki, David, and Abelman (2008) extended these discussions to argue for a critical consideration of colonialism in the psychology of culture that goes beyond the East – West dichotomy to also consider the histories of colonial relations between and within countries. They draw on the work in the area of colonialism to show the role of social, political and historical forces in shaping lives. The authors’ point to similar critiques as those highlighted above to suggest that cross-cultural and cultural psychological models, and in our view community psychological approaches, need to be expanded to consider how major geopolitical and historical factors shape everyday lives.

For the purposes of this article, culture is understood as a process, an ongoing social construction that speaks of the ways in which we learn to live and make sense of life always in relationship to others within specific social/economic/political/historical contexts (see Geertz, 1973; Jessen, 2007).

... culture is a historically situated, collective product constituted by the values, beliefs,

perceptions, symbols, and other humanly created artifacts which are transmitted across generations through language and other mediums. .... culture is simultaneously a product of human action as well as a determinant of future action, a composite of meanings and associated traditions, which define, inform, and constitute the range of our understandings and investments. (Misra & Gergen, 1993, p. 226)

In sum, culture refers to a historical product, a process and a means for action.

To the extent that community psychologists are interested in addressing issues of power and social justice, understandings of culture need to be placed within critical frameworks that examine the dynamics of the social reproduction and contestation of inequality. This is not to say that matters of diversity, translation, sensitivity and knowledge of different groups are irrelevant to community psychology. However, taking concrete steps to becoming increasingly aware of cultural issues in research and practice without a critical standpoint runs the risk of perpetuating the ills of colonial relations (see Gone, 2007).

#### Coloniality of Power, Culture, and Knowledge: Crafting a Decolonizing Standpoint

Part of the difficulty the field experiences in seeing culture in its complexity stems from the continuing legacy of coloniality in the social sciences (psychology included). Western thought has been characterized by a longstanding tendency to partition reality and build knowledge on such multiple separations (e.g. “human beings/nature,” “mind/body,” “self/other,” “object/subject”) (Lander, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Smith, 1999). This worldview would have been just one among many if it had not been central to the globalization of the European colonial project launched with the conquest of Abya Yala – name some indigenous movements give to what is otherwise known as the American continent. The convergence of Western thought and ways of knowing with Eurocentric colonialism resulted in the imposition of a

hierarchical articulation of difference (e.g., “civilized/uncivilized,” “modern/primitive,” “expert knowledge/general knowledge”, “development/underdevelopment,” “saved/condemn,” “European/Other,” “White/Other”) to the benefit of the ruling classes.<sup>1</sup> Western/Modern social science was built upon this conceptualization of the world and has served to justify and naturalize this world order as “the way things are” (Cole, 2003; Lander, 2005; Smith, 1999), rather than a result of the history of power (Quijano, 2000). The convergence among these forces and its continuing legacy is known as coloniality of power, culture and knowledge (see the edited volume by Lander, 2005; also Quijano 2000, 2007). Thus, to challenge coloniality we must recognize that “all social and historical phenomena are part of or express a social relation or a web of social relationships. As such, social-historical phenomena cannot be understood outside the relational field it belongs to, its socio-historical totality” (Quijano, 2000, p. 352).

There is a body of work that shows how coloniality shapes understandings of culture, and subsequently identity, to position the West as the standard in relation to other cultural groups and justify their oppression and marginalization (e.g., Bulhan, 1985; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Holdstock, 2000; Said, 1979; Sinha & Kao, 1997; Smith, 1999). In Australia, some have argued that the Cartesian model of knowing that is dominant in social science research underpins much of the knowledge constructed about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people representing them as an inferior other and universalizing “whiteness” (Dodson, 2003; Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006; Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2004). Similarly, Smith (1999) argued that Western knowledge production processes have privileged Western ways of doing and being while it has dehumanized Maori and Maori knowledge, practices and language. In Puerto Rico, school

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<sup>1</sup> This particular form of Eurocentric power is intricately linked with the emergence of capitalism as the dominant economic and values system. Its establishment came about at the cost of vanquishing other ways of being and knowing that existed in what came to be known as Europe (see Lander, 2005).

children learn about the history of slavery from the perspective of the white slave owners and white abolitionists while the dominant public discourse emphasizes an interracial national identity that silences everyday experiences of racism (Godreau, Reyes Cruz, Franco Ortiz & Cuadrado, 2008).

These debates signal that ethnicity and race are not static, neutral or objective markers but rather subjective, flexible and politicized processes. Social group memberships based on ethnicity, race, gender, afford people differential access to power and privilege in different contexts. Power is (re)produced in and through cultural means, and this is manifested in everyday interactions. Seeing culture through the lens of coloniality unveils the masks of neutrality and objectivity that are part of this legacy (Quijano, 2000). Decolonizing culture requires actively deconstructing notions of the other based on the enduring legacy of colonial relations, beginning to understand the meaning of difference, its micro-politics as well as its sociological/historical/economic/political context, examining “the dialectic between the local and the global” (Rizvi, 2007, p. 262).

Hall (1996) suggests that “questions of culture and ideology” are given “a formative, not merely expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life” (p. 443). From this perspective, culture is seen as a “system of continually contested meanings in which ‘societies’ and ‘individuals’ are (re)produced and transformed, but within a nexus of social relations around domination and subordination” (Griffin, 2000, p. 20). Such a complex conceptualization of culture can lead us to deeper understandings of the interconnectedness between culture and power.

#### Approaching Culture from a Decolonizing Standpoint: Notes from the Field

This article is part of a broader effort concerned with developing a critical and

transformative community psychology committed to decolonization, collective empowerment and liberation (e.g., Huygens, 2006; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Moane, 2003; Montero, , 2007, 2009; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003; Glover, Dudgeon & Huygens, 2005). Although still far from mainstream, some social and community psychology work examines the intersections between culture, coloniality and empowerment (e.g., Borg, 2006; Gone, 2007; Moane, 2003; Reyes Cruz, 2008a, b; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2005; Serrano-García, 1994; Sonn, 2004a, b). We wish to contribute to this broader project by articulating a decolonizing standpoint from where to understand culture within an awareness of a broader set of social/political/historical/economic arrangements.

A decolonizing standpoint is a transdisciplinary and political stance grounded in critical social theories and methodologies to understand and expose the continuing legacy of coloniality. Our decolonizing standpoint is informed by writings in critical feminism (hooks, 1990; Anzaldúa, 1999); critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005); whiteness studies (Fine, Weiss, Powell, & Mun Wong, 1997; Green, Sonn, & Matsebula, 2007); liberation and critical psychology (Freire, 1972; Martín-Baró, 1994; Montero, 1997/2001, 2007; Parker, 2005), coloniality of power and knowledge (Quijano, 2000, 2007) and the study of social reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). These different theoretical lenses are consonant with community psychology's general commitment to developing ways of being, knowing and doing that contribute to decolonization and liberation. Shared within these theoretical lenses is a focus on the workings of power, where power is seen as produced in and through symbolic means within the broader context of social relations. Therefore, a key element of a decolonizing standpoint is to de-ideologize (Martín-Baró, 1994), to deconstruct ideologies and discourses that obscure the

workings of power. As Smith (1999) has indicated, this requires researchers and practitioners to examine the motivations and the basic assumptions that inform knowledge production within contexts of intergroup relations. The deconstruction opens the way to transformation as we recognize different ways of knowing and value the lived experiences and voices of the marginalized.

Our aim here is to show how we attempt to engage different settings from a decolonizing standpoint. First, we present material from [first author]'s critical ethnographic work with Mexican immigrant parents that revealed colonial ways of approaching the ethnic-other in an ethnically and racially diverse school district in the Midwest of the United States. Next we offer autoethnographic writing by [second author] that shows the ways in which Indigenous theorizing and whiteness studies are translated to a diversity class with mainly white students in Australia. In both these sets of notes from the field the intersections between power, culture and knowledge are made evident to unmask coloniality in everyday discourse and action.

*Notes from the Field Part I: Culture, Politics and Capital in a Diverse School District*

Public schools galvanize multiple stakeholders toward actions that reflect common, collective, and conflictive interests. Thus, schools cannot be understood without grappling with politics and power. For several years I have been developing strategies to integrate critical ethnography with education organizing working as a witness/actor in ground-up mobilization efforts (Reyes Cruz, 2008a, c). Critical ethnography is ethnographic work framed within critical theory traditions. Just as in traditional ethnography, the ethnographer engages in prolonged participant-observation, writing field notes, conducting informal and formal interviews, analyzing public documents and artifacts. However, critical ethnographers aim to develop situated, self-reflexive work that connects everyday life experiences of people and communities

with the workings of power in ways that amplify the voices of the oppressed and contribute to their struggle for liberation (Carspecken, 1996; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Trueba & McLaren, 2000).

After working in social services and academic research in New York City for several years, I moved to the U.S. Midwest to pursue a doctorate in community psychology. The town, mostly white and European descent, had experienced a substantial increase in monolingual Latino American immigrants in recent years. The challenges of ethnic diversity were becoming apparent as I began to engage in community work for education equity. I was no stranger to cultural dislocation; a racialized (post)colonial subject, a brown immigrant woman from the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, growing up between Puerto Rico, Spain and the U.S. While I could recognize significant differences between other immigrants from south of the border and myself (e.g., immigration status, formal education), I thought at least my experiences as a bilingual/bicultural immigrant could be useful to new immigrants facing the challenges of being a racialized and ethnicized minority.

At first I became a volunteer at an after-school program serving working-poor Latin American children and their families. Soon I was asked to be the program liaison to a public elementary school. This work led me to engage with school and school district staff in different efforts to address the needs of the new immigrant population. In the process I also became an ally to a group of Mexican immigrant parents organizing to advocate for their children's educational rights. In the course of four years, I took on the thorny role of becoming a cultural broker for immigrants and others, translating language and cultural meaning in different settings, facilitating and negotiating communication across cultural and experiential divides (Reyes Cruz, 2008a).

Initially, I entered the field in response to a community identified need for multicultural/bilingual professionals who could work with the new ethnic minority. But as the work developed, it became apparent that – beyond ethnic-based cultural differences – the main problems that marginalized immigrants faced had to do with power inequities in their relationships with institutionalized structures embodied by men and women, White, Black, Latino/a and Mexican. The ways in which power was organized in school settings were entrenched in a culture that kept the poor and marginalized in a subordinate place. An understanding of the coloniality of power moved this work from focusing on issues of ethnic-based cultural rights (e.g., access to materials in Spanish) towards the social reproduction of inequality, particularly how cultural and political capital were enacted to maintain ethnicized working-poor immigrants at the margins of school decision-making.

The concept of cultural capital, as articulated by the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, links macro and micro-levels of analysis to account for the intersections between culture and power in everyday life. Cultural capital speaks about the ways of knowing, knowledge and practices of the ruling classes *and* their capacity to establish their norms as the main criteria for evaluating what is good, valid and worthwhile (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The norms are not fixed or inherently “good” but rather serve the interest of the dominant classes and thus, can and do continuously change.

One of the main sources of contention between Latin American immigrants and the school system was bilingual education. It was the first time the school district was mandated to offer services in Spanish. With limited resources and expertise, the school district implemented a bilingual program that was far from what many Latino American parents had hoped.



The district indicated they wanted parent input on what types of programs would be implemented in the upcoming years and the coordinator wanted to make sure parents made informed decisions ... For several [public] meetings district staff described different models and their effectiveness ... Lucero [a Mexican mother, wanted the program that] would facilitate the students' bilingualism, support parent-child relationships by strengthening the children's knowledge of the home language, and equalize the academic-racial hierarchy of the schools.

<p><i>Hasta ahorita el programa que más me ha convencido es el de dual immersion... O sea, ahora sí, no sé quién me dijo, “Estamos en Estados Unidos, tenemos que aprender inglés.” Entonces, pero uno también como madre no quiere que sus hijos sólo agarren inglés. Imagínate al rato ¿qué comunicación voy a tener con ellos? ... A lo mejor si se llega a hacer lo del dual immersion sean equitativas las cosas porque tanto como los americanos se van a tener que esforzar para aprender la materia.</i></p>	<p>So far the program that has convinced me the most is dual immersion. Now, I don't know who said, “We are in the United States we have to learn English.” But as a mother I don't want our children to learn only English. Imagine then, what kind of communication am I going to have with them? And maybe if they end up having the dual immersion program things will be more equitable because Americans would also have to make an effort to learn the subjects [in a second language].</p>
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When parents and staff finally met to decide what program they wanted implemented ... district staff presented [choices] that had not been discussed before ... A mother asked ... “What do you know about the effectiveness of these program options?” The district staff

replied those were the options other districts were implementing; although they did not know how effective the programs were they believed it would be better than what the schools currently had (Reyes Cruz, 2008a, 138-139).

While the school district engaged Latino American immigrant parents in symbolic participation, Mexican parents mobilized to demand authentic participation in school decision-making (Reyes Cruz, 2008a; see also Anderson, 1998). The parents were adopting the cultural norms valued by the schools (e.g., attending meetings, volunteering, working with their children at home) and raising the stakes for public accountability. However, their efforts were rebuffed and the Mexican parents did not have the necessary political capital to have a say. That is, at that time, they did not have the needed capacity and strength to influence decisions about public matters to their benefit (Mediratta, 1995). The group was fraught with their own internal conflicts. And they were struggling against a fundamentally antidemocratic school culture. Despite the prevalent discourse on advancing parent participation in decision-making, building school-community collaboration, embracing diversity and multiculturalism,

certain cultural practices promoted individual over collective interventions couched in a colonial discourse that emphasized the deficits of marginalized families and their debt to those helping them. Most of the people involved, regardless of their position in the power hierarchy, would at times adopt the colonial discourse. This discourse served to squelch dissent with dominant school practices (Reyes Cruz, 2008, p. 153).

The colonial discourse reflects what Memmi (1957/1983) describes as a “colonial mentality”: “the psychological consequences of oppression for both dominant and oppressed groups” (Reyes Cruz, 2008, p. 173).

Laura, a light-skinned Mexican immigrant mother, had summoned the principal, her daughter's teacher (both white U.S. Americans), the bilingual teacher (a light-skinned woman of Mexican descent) and myself (the brown Puerto Rican ally-translator) to discuss some of her concerns regarding her child's schooling. The school was located in a predominately poor and African American neighborhood. Its students were mostly African Americans and immigrants from Latin America.

[Laura] expressed her concern with what she described as "lack of respect in the school"... She had seen staff mistreating children, particularly African American students. Her child was also being mistreated by other children and the adults were not intervening ... The principal explained that not all parents had the same vision as Laura, they were not interested in getting involved in the school or what their children do, they didn't teach their children respect, and that was what the school had to deal with ...

Laura insisted the issue was a school-wide problem. She suggested that the staff work on the staff end and she could work with other parents ... The principal broke the silence, "You should encourage your daughter to come to the staff when others are bothering her and we will deal with the situation" ... On our way out ... Laura said to me, "*No pueden ver más allá* (They can't see beyond their noses) ... they want to make it about my child."

(Reyes Cruz, 2008, p. 153-154)

Coloniality worked at different levels: from the racialized/ethnicized ways in which staff enacted their cultural capital deciding what counted as valid knowledge, to the ways in which they promoted child-focused individualistic parent participation separating the personal from the communal/public quieting potential claims of collective discontent. By actively engaging in critical conversations about public education with different social actors the Mexican parents

opened spaces for challenging colonial relations. The parents showed they were critically watching, seeing what was being done to the children, communicating they were not going to stand for it.

*Notes from the Field Part II: Autoethnographic<sup>2</sup> Reflections toward Decolonizing Interventions into Race Relations*

I was a ‘coloured’ South African moving to Australia when, before I knew it, I was committed to the decolonization agendas of Indigenous Australians. I grew up during the Apartheid era in South Africa. My family immigrated to Australia in the mid 1980s, partly to find better economic opportunities and partly to find a way out of Apartheid. As I got immersed in Australian society, it became apparent that racism here was of a different kind. It was not a legal system; racism was more subtle, emerging through discursive networks and the micro-politics of power. In South Africa I was labeled coloured and positioned in-between black and white. The membership afforded me privileges while being discriminated against by the same people imposing marginality on me. In Australia there was no such explicit hierarchy, yet, I was constructed as a racialized outsider in relation to an ostensibly white majority.

For the last 14 years, I’ve work in a predominantly white academic context as a researcher and educator in community psychology teaching mostly non-Indigenous students. I was already sensitive to how community psychology uses notions like race, ethnicity and culture to categorize groups often misrepresenting people like me. But that became further complicated as I engaged with the writings of Indigenous scholars in Australia and Aotearoa (often known as New Zealand) (Martin, 2003; Oxenham, 2000; Smith, 1999). They were writing back, writing about decolonization and anti-colonialism, to assert Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and

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<sup>2</sup> Autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)

being in the world. As I engaged in this work nagging questions emerged. What are the implications of these writings for my research and teaching? How would I engage in empowerment praxis when the dominant ways of being, knowing, and doing of the discipline are named as problematic? I began to explore possible answers through collaborating in projects led by Indigenous Australians, raising the stakes for our white colleagues and students in research and teaching settings.

Part of my work as an ally to Indigenous Australians has been to work with the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University in Western Australia to incorporate issues of diversity into psychology courses and to research individual and community responses to oppression. I was learning about the history and continuing oppression of Indigenous people and wanted to be involved in responding without imposing my agenda. The writing and activities of the Centre, particularly those focused on Indigenous Australians rights to self-determination, made even more salient how some of the assumptions and theoretical tools that underpin psychology actually worked to silence and undermine Indigenous voices (e.g., being trained as “expert” and “objective knower” of others, developing models privileging Western ways of being and knowing, building theory based on core values such as individualism).

The exchanges with Indigenous Australian colleagues and our shared experiences led me to turn the gaze away from a superficial understanding of the cultures of others onto examining one’s own culture in relation to other cultural groups. My discomfort recognizing the disempowering effects of the knowledge production practices of my discipline and from being othered in different contexts moved me to problematize normativity. I began deconstructing dominance through research and teaching while affirming the cultural identities and aspirations of those silenced in Australia’s Eurocentric psychology. And then I discovered the critical

writings in whiteness studies and privilege.

Critical whiteness writers argue that whiteness signals "...the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (Frankenberg, 1993, p.236). Those who belong to this group are typically not asked to reflect on their cultural identities because their culture is the norm. Thus, whiteness is often invisible; members are blind to the privileges that they have by virtue of their group membership. The invisibility of whiteness is what makes it so powerful; people are rendered blind to the ways in which culturally sanctioned practices can work in an exclusionary and often colonising manner. These writings resonated deeply within me. After all, I feel the brunt of it.

I am outside whiteness because I am a black person, an immigrant in Australia, keenly aware of how racism is significant in the lives of people of color. And yet, I belong to a white institution and have been trained in a historically Eurocentric academic discipline. I am inside whiteness. My colleagues and the majority of the students in psychology programs in Australia are ostensibly "white." I had seen white colleagues "being helpful" without necessarily considering or understanding the different discourses that position non-indigenous people as helpers and Indigenous people as requiring help and the implications of these for empowerment work. Everyday we see how mainstream institutionalized systems in Australia privilege the knowledge and tools of Eurocentric psychology while looking suspiciously at Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing (Dudgeon & Oxenham, 1990). Indigenous colleagues and I witness the ways in which non-Indigenous allies end up taking over spaces created for Indigenous people often becoming recognized as experts on Indigenous matters.

As a response, a diverse group of colleagues – including Indigenous scholars – and I

began to integrate as a key part of the Race Relations and Psychology course the history of race relations in Australia focusing on Indigenous writers. Students were challenged to explore key concepts (race, ethnicity and culture) used in psychological research to examine difference to then turn to the whiteness literature shifting the focus from the “other” to their own group memberships. This turn exposes taken for granted social positions and the privileges afforded because of those positionings. Problematizing how the cultures of “others” are typically treated as static and antiquated was central; this served to reveal how understandings of self and others are produced through historically situated discourses, taken for granted knowledge and everyday practices within social and political contexts. Ultimately, the challenge is to grasp the implications of those understandings for everyday interactions.

Teaching about whiteness to ostensibly white students has proven to be quite challenging. The notion of whiteness is contested by most students, and so it should be. Typically the students’ initial response is to resist or reject the notion. The initial rejection, more often than not, is about equating whiteness with racism and they do not want to be seen as racist. The response is to disconnect from the history of race relations and engage in us/them constructions without considering the societal arrangements that whiteness speaks to.

John, an older student who identified his Irish ancestry, wrote in his journal for the class:

I honestly believe that I had a head start though. I honestly think that I've been a person that's always been fairly sensitive to these issues. The fact that I had an Indian brother in-law from the age of 7, and grew up amongst lots of Italians and Greeks has probably helped – but I don't want to sell my own personality short either. Some people's hearts are in the right place.

Stewart another older student who identified as third or fourth generation Australian, wrote:

A final thought occurred regarding privilege. Previously although I have stated that I

recognize the privileges afforded to me due to my ancestry/identity, one sentence uttered by a fellow student; “Privilege is not something earned or deserved” has really caused me to question my ontology.

Their responses also get more complicated. Students fragment whiteness turning to hyphenated identities (Italian-Australian, Greek-Australian, or Macedonian-Australian) in an attempt to ethnicize their Australian-ness. However, a hierarchy within whiteness is created with Australian (meaning Anglo-Celtic) remaining undisturbed at the top. I had to breathe deeply and find ways to empathize with the students struggle. Luckily I was not alone in this.

The experience with students of color has been the opposite. The topic of whiteness is exciting, they want to hear about it, engage with it. For them it is obvious; they live and experience whiteness. They know how they are positioned as “perpetual strangers” in a country that imagines itself as “white” (Hage, 2000). These students, the Indigenous, the refugee, the immigrant and the children of immigrants, sense of belonging are regulated by whiteness in different ways in everyday settings and often through seemingly innocuous micro practices including questions such as: Where are you from? and statements such as “you are just like us” .

This work creates contact zones, spaces where separated people come together, feel vulnerable and at risk (Somerville & Perkins, 2003). The powerful ways in which we are positioned as “other” by and through discourses begin to be questioned. These contact zones represent opportunities for unmasking coloniality engaging identity politics to examine dynamics of oppression and possibilities for liberation. The work requires going beyond static and fixed understandings of self and other to engage conceptualizations of culture that are concerned with lived experiences. This is the work that called me into community psychology in the first place.

### Summary and Concluding Remarks



Community psychology aims to address collective distress as a product of social dynamics of inequality taking into account the multiple dimensions of diversity. The field has made important strides in developing an awareness and practice consistent with its positioning in favor of diversity in its multiple dimensions recognizing deeper cultural processes that impact the problems we attend. However, we think community psychology still has work to do to understand the ways in which culture is intertwined with power/oppression/exploitation and locate those processes within historical/social/political contexts.

In this article we have engaged in critical reflection of the ways in which the field's view of culture and those thought of as "other" is shaped by the continuing legacy of colonial relations. We contend that culture should be central to the field to the extent that community psychologists are committed to abandoning colonizing approaches to the marginalized other. Analyses of diversity and culture devoid of a critical understanding of the politics of context can easily fall into essentializing social inequality as issues of poor/rich, black/white, immigrant/non-immigrant, or "cultural" (to mean racialized and ethnicized) differences without challenging the roots of oppression/exploitation. Cultural matters, we argue, need to be approached from a decolonizing standpoint to understand how power, privilege and oppression have historically been intricately linked within "the cultural" in the multiple facets of community psychology work.

This article goes further in current community psychology theorizing by locating culture within coloniality and power, and showing alternative methodologies to engage culture from a decolonizing standpoint at the level of teaching, writing and community research and action. Without a decolonizing standpoint for understanding cultural matters the struggles of recent immigrant working-poor families in a school district would have been left at the level of, for

instance, differences in cultural practices and understandings, lack of translation and quality of bilingual services. What would remain hidden is how cultural capital is enacted in everyday practices to maintain marginalized minorities subordinate to the ways of being, understanding and doing of the dominant school culture (in our exemplar, white-middle class). Without a decolonizing standpoint, teaching diversity to a predominantly white student body in a racialized society would end up reproducing the marginalized “other” (e.g., focusing on understanding the culture of the ethnicized and racialized groups) rather than revealing the ways in which the colonial legacy has shaped the dominant culture positioning whiteness as a norm in academic and other practices.

While it continues to be vital for psychologists to develop their conceptual, intellectual and personal capacities to work with diversity issues, this should not be an aim in itself but a road to an intercultural and critical praxis within community psychology. By interculturality we mean a stance of recognition of the cultural rights of different groups and the imperative to learn from each other from a place of ontological, epistemological and methodological parity (see Dávalos, 2005; Bonilla, 2004; Quijano, 2007). That is, working towards interculturality is working to eliminate cultural capital in its normative function, chipping away at institutional processes that marginalize historically oppressed ways of being, knowing and doing, including knowledge itself.

In our work we have come to realize the importance of critically reflecting on our discipline and our own multiple positionings – those that afford us power within broader social/political/historical contexts and those that keep us at the margins. *Critical reflexivity* is more than individual-level self awareness. It also requires that we constantly evaluate ways in which we contribute to both liberation and oppression. To this end, we agree with others, that

*transdisciplinarity* focused on critical social theory is central to the development of an emancipatory community psychology, one devoted to transformative research and action. This is as much an academic as an ethical and political stance.

As we craft our decolonizing standpoint, we have found extremely valuable writings in critical race theory, whiteness studies, feminist critique, Indigenous research and coloniality. These literatures are concerned with decolonization by identifying deeper process of exclusion and oppression, de-centering the dominance of Western ways of knowing and doing, and bringing to the foreground indigenous and other marginalized knowledges. With this come new opportunities to engage innovative methodologies to achieve socially just and transformative research and action. This includes going beyond the dominant modes of knowledge production (such as logical positivism) to include different practices that will affirm the knowledges of marginalized communities and thereby also contribute to social transformation.

We believe community psychology can and should make important contributions to the study of cultural matters by revealing and addressing the experiential intersections between culture, power, and empowerment in everyday contexts. As a field we recognize, as did Dewey (1938), that “in actual experience, there is never any such isolated singular object or event; an object or event is always a special part, phase, or aspect, of an environing experienced world” (p. 67 as cited by Cole, 2003, p. 132). We believe the field must reinvent its institutional practices to develop and support intercultural, critical and transdisciplinary praxis. To this end, we would like to see increasing concerted efforts to a) develop intercultural competencies such as multicultural and multilingual skills (e.g., requiring students to take a second language and work in diverse settings where their social positions are de-centered); b) examine the social and political history of the communities we work with as these are intertwined with issues of health, equity and self-

determination; c) expand community psychology's theoretical and methodological horizons for understanding the micro-politics of culture, power and knowledge in specific settings; and d) create spaces and opportunities for critical reflexivity to explore and challenge our positions in power hierarchies. Ultimately, we hope that understanding cultural matters from a decolonizing standpoint will move us closer towards realizing the emancipatory values of community psychology.

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