

Creating Justice Psychology

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Note: Identifying information is redacted.

After an evening of drinking, [REDACTED] and I found ourselves sipping water whilst sitting in [REDACTED] Victorian-style living room. We were chatting with [REDACTED] [REDACTED] about everything and nothing as I prepared to make the drive from Munhall to Squirrel Hill. About an hour into the conversation, we turned to a subject that was sobering to begin with but ultimately so once everyone's views were voiced. We found ourselves discussing race in America. Among the topics discussed were the absence of the black father (and the reasons for that absence), gang violence, and drug "crimes". I tried to use facts and figures to discuss mass incarceration. [REDACTED] explained what she saw every day at her internship at Family Resources' therapeutic preschool. We circled the edges of white privilege and redlining. We even poked at the historical trauma rooted in the enslavement of blacks at the founding of the American colonies. None of it mattered much. Ultimately, this exchange occurred:

[REDACTED]: I will tell you one thing; I have been around much longer than you.

[REDACTED]: [REDACTED], just because you have been around longer does not mean that you are right.

The conversation lasted about a forty-five grueling, uncomfortable minutes and illuminated a lot about everyone involved. The love I have for my [REDACTED] family is no less. In fact, it may even be truer now that I understand some of their deepest imperfections. After all, this is the family that took me in after my mother and sister passed away, one after the other. They accepted me as [REDACTED] and welcomed me as one of their own. I sincerely believe that they are good people. They are simply steeped in racist messaging that exists nationwide.

At least for me, so much of that conversation involved psychology. It brought up so many questions: Why are we so afraid of those that look different than us? Why do we accept our lived

experience as the ultimate truth? How can prejudice build and through what mediums? More than anything, the conversation got me thinking about the history of these confrontations and the impact that they have had across time, space, and culture.

In Ayurdhi Dhar's interview with Joseph Gone, a renowned Harvard psychologist, the topic of Native American marginalization is discussed at length. The primary aim of the interview is to explore and explain the ways in which "a history of dispossession, conquest, and colonization shapes mental health outcomes..." (Dhar, 2019). Gone's findings are not unique to the Native American community. In fact, the theory of historical trauma is transferable to a variety of foregrounds. Racism in the United States is one such foreground. The legacies of Western imperialism in Africa and Asia is another.

With the concept of historical trauma leading this exploration, I posit that it is time for a new school of psychology to take root in the United States and across the globe. I refer to the school's defining theory as "justice psychology". In the following paragraphs, I seek to explain the role that both natural and human science has in the development of justice psychology, the things that will make such a development possible, and the vision for justice psychology in our twenty-first century.

The tension between natural and human science approaches to psychology has not aided the healing of historical trauma. Natural science's monopoly over psychological and psychiatric care in the United States' cannot create an environment for the healing of historical trauma seeing that natural science's model is not privy to social and cultural contexts. That said, natural science does have contributions to make to a newly forming school of justice psychology. One of the most vital contributions we get from natural science psychology is the study of the connection between mind and body. This vitality is illustrated in the Adverse Childhood

Experiences Study (ACE). ACE analyzed “[t]he relationship of health risk behavior and disease in adulthood to the breadth of exposure to childhood emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, and household dysfunction during childhood...” (Felitti et. Al, 1998, p. 245). Natural science has been able to deeply account for the connection between trauma and negative health outcomes. This measurement is invaluable and will be sorely needed as we develop a school for justice psychology.

With that said, human science treatment and methodology is much more equipped to take the lead on the development of justice psychology. This begins with the pitfalls of natural science. As mentioned prior, natural science does not account for the variety of contexts that human beings exist within. Historical trauma is in its essence, contextual. Without context, it can be said that historical trauma is nonexistent. This kind of reductionism is one of the factors that renders the natural science perspective so popular – but so much is missed. Even more, natural science psychology commonly holds that the individual is the sole site of calamity. Joseph Gone states, “It [the historical context] recognizes that these problems arose as a result of these colonial encounters and not just because the individual is deficient and to be blamed” (Dhar, 2019).

Human science psychology does not encounter these problems to the same extent that natural science psychology does. Human science psychology not only accounts for context but embraces it as an explanatory mecca. It accounts for all that surrounds the individual, as well as the individual. Human science psychology also includes language and culture as institutions of understanding and healing. Dhar and Gone discuss the role of language in treatment at great length, making mention of the difficulty that is faced when practitioners do not understand the semantics associated with inherited, historical trauma. The overlap between human science

psychology and language rose with Wilhelm Wundt's study of psycholinguistics and fell to natural science's criticism over a short period of time. In a brief history of psycholinguistics, Wundt's preference for a human science approach to language is expressed: "Wundt never tired of defending certain German idealist traditions of thought...against the mechanistic Herbartian school" (Blumenthal, 1987, p. 315). A return to the curiosity and creativity of language in psychology would bode well of justice psychology. Similarly, a focus on cultural is prescribed for the school's development. Gone writes, "[there] are thousands and thousands of Indian people who will attest to the fact that they've contended with these serious issues and been helped by culture and tradition..." (Dhar, 2019). It is astoundingly obvious that a natural science psychology perspective would laugh at the idea of embracing cultural practices as a way of healing. However, this is exactly what would need to be employed in a tradition which focuses on justice psychology. When I was a freshman in college, I listened to Dr. Edward Tick give a lecture on the United States military and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He explained that the rates of PTSD widely differed between American and Vietnamese veterans. He cited one of the primary reasons for the lower Vietnamese rates as the culture and rituals of acceptance that soldiers were greeted with upon their return home. Dr. Edward Tick's work proves the efficacy of utilizing culture in healing. In *Humanities*, Amy Lifson provides a succinct overview of sweat lodge therapy that Tick was involved in. Overall, human science psychology's employ is far more expansive than that of natural science and its tools are more effective for treating historical trauma.

Now that I have explained the respective roles of natural and human science approaches in the development of justice psychology, it is important to explore additional issues that will make or break the ability for such a lens to take root. First, we must be willing to question

everything. In a grand exercise of Cartesian epistemology, we must examine what we know to be helpful from natural science psychology and retire what we know is not. It will require much reflection and preparation, but a school of justice psychology necessitates new perspectives. Additionally, justice psychology must be interdisciplinary. For therapeutic intervention of any nature to be effective, we must educate and legislate for better conditions moving forward. As much as justice psychology must heal the past, it must change the future. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in” (Roark, 2016).

Bibliography

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