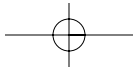
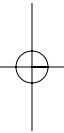
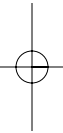


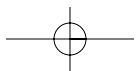
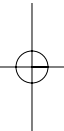
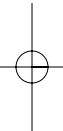
---

# **Part 1**

---

## Critical Overviews





## 1

# Critical Psychology For Social Justice: Concerns and Dilemmas

Dennis Fox, Isaac Prilleltensky,  
and Stephanie Austin

## Chapter Topics

Central Concerns And Relevant Core Concepts	5
Individualism and Meaninglessness: The Level of Analysis	5
Inequality and Oppression: The Role of Ideology	8
Intention and Consequence: The Trap of Neutrality	10
Central Dilemmas	11
The Nature of Human Nature	13
The Scope of Social Change and Political Action	14
Organizing Matters	17

*Critical Psychology: An Introduction* presents an array of approaches that challenge mainstream psychology in fundamental ways. By *mainstream psychology* we mean the psychology that universities most often teach and that clinicians, researchers, and consultants most often practise. It is the psychology you probably studied in your introductory course, presented as a science whose researchers use objective methods to understand human behaviour and whose practitioners help individuals cope with distress. Building on their research findings, mainstream psychologists who recognize the societal sources of that distress sometimes propose institutional reforms to help people function more effectively. In short, most psychologists expect to do good. And often they do. Critical psychologists, in contrast, see things very differently. We believe that mainstream psychology has institutionalized a narrow view of the field's ethical mandate to promote human welfare. That narrowness leads to many negative consequences, as this book elaborates in some detail.

As we see it, the minor reforms to smooth out society's rough edges that mainstream psychologists most often endorse simply don't go far enough. Dominant cultural, economic, and political institutions exhibit two fundamental

problems especially relevant to psychology: they misdirect efforts to live a fulfilling life and they foster inequality and oppression. What concerns us as psychologists is that these institutions routinely use psychological knowledge and techniques to maintain an unacceptable status quo. Instead of exposing and opposing this use, however, mainstream psychology strengthens it. Its prevailing conceptions of human needs and values and its image of scientific objectivity too readily accommodate harmful institutional power. Furthermore, as a powerful institution in its own right, psychology generates its own harmful consequences that fall particularly hard on those who are oppressed and vulnerable. Instead of tinkering with the edges, thus, critical psychologists from a variety of critical traditions advocate not just minor reform but fundamentally different social structures more likely to lead to social justice and human wellbeing. We imagine and explore alternatives. We think psychology can do better.

We also know firsthand how uncomfortable it can be to read criticism of values, assumptions, and practices that we think are basically sound. Mainstream psychology courses typically do not scrutinize in any serious way the social, moral, and political implications of research, theory, and practice. Partly because *critical psychology* rejects the underlying perspectives taught in those courses, our critique might strike you as ‘too political’ or ‘ideological’. Unfortunately, psychology’s fragmentation and overspecialization reduce exposure to fields such as political theory, sociology, and anthropology that more often explore critiques of the status quo. Students planning to work as psychologists and psychologists already in practice may misinterpret as a personal attack our critique of the system. As critical psychologists see it, however, justifications for our own roles within that system sometimes reflect political or ideological values too often left unexamined.

You will discover in the chapters ahead that, despite our overlapping analyses, suspicions, generalizations, and conclusions, critical psychologists do not know all the answers. You will also discover that most of us occupy traditional professional roles as therapists, researchers, evaluators, consultants, teachers, students, or advocates. What makes us different, or so we like to think, is our effort to raise questions about what we and others are doing. We want to be agents of social change, not agents of social control. We move ahead despite knowing that we cannot always succeed, or be entirely consistent, or even always know for sure what success might look like.

Reflecting our varied backgrounds and interests, critical psychology’s intersecting approaches differ from one another in philosophical justification, methodological preference, political strategy, favoured terminology, and ultimate priority. It would not be too far off the mark to talk about a range of critical psychologies rather than a single approach. To make this even more confusing, many critical psychologists do not even use the term critical psychology, and sometimes psychologists do important work that advances progressive aims despite being steeped in mainstream assumptions and methods. That’s why, when inviting colleagues to contribute to this second

edition of *Critical Psychology: An Introduction*, we did not insist upon a single perspective. We focused instead on central themes common to a variety of critical traditions: pursuing social justice, promoting the welfare of communities in general and oppressed groups in particular, and transforming the status quo of both society and psychology.

In the remainder of this chapter, we first introduce core concepts related to critical psychology's central concerns and internal dilemmas. We then explain how the rest of the book explores these concerns and dilemmas in greater depth.

### central concerns and relevant core concepts

We have already touched on three interrelated concerns drawing significant critical psychology attention, which we can summarize loosely as follows:

- 1 by focusing on the individual rather than the group and larger society, mainstream psychology overemphasizes individualistic values, hinders the attainment of mutuality and community, and strengthens unjust institutions;
- 2 mainstream psychology's underlying assumptions and institutional allegiances disproportionately hurt members of powerless and marginalized groups by facilitating inequality and oppression; and
- 3 these unacceptable outcomes occur regardless of psychologists' individual or collective intentions to the contrary.

In this section we describe these concerns in more organized fashion. In the process, we explain the relevance of three central concepts: mainstream psychology's restricted *level of analysis*; the role of *ideology* in strengthening the status quo; and psychology's false claim to *scientific objectivity and political neutrality*. Although these are not the only relevant concepts, they are the ones you will encounter throughout this book.

### *individualism and meaninglessness: the level of analysis*

In every society, economic, educational, religious, and other institutions inculcate into their members preferred views of human nature and social order. Those views, and the institutions they support, vary from society to society much more widely than we often realize. The enormous normative diversity among the world's thousands of historical and currently existing cultures often astonishes people who grew up assuming their own beliefs and preferences represented 'normality'. In contrast to anthropologists, whose field most directly studies the world's diverse behaviours, institutions, and power arrangements, psychologists too often forget that many of the behaviours they and others around them engage in every day reflect culture and history rather

than universal inevitability. Thomas Teo notes in Chapter 3 that mainstream psychology shows little awareness of psychological perspectives from other cultural traditions, or that Western psychology itself is a 'local psychology' – or, as Ingrid Huygens puts it in her discussion of colonization, an 'indigenous psychology' (Chapter 16). 'No culture has all the answers', Tod Sloan adds, 'but our theories ... should at least not universalize the values of the culture from which they arise' (Chapter 19).

Despite globalization's expansion and corporate efforts to homogenize human experience, it is important to keep in mind that traditional Eastern cultures do not share the West's dominant individualistic underpinnings, and that colonizers trumpeting individualist, nationalist, Christian, and capitalist values have routinely dominated and decimated indigenous cultures. Knowing that our values reflect our own cultural assumptions, critical psychologists pay particular attention to dominant institutions in Westernized societies – the societies within which most psychologists live and work and mainstream psychology developed. From childrearing advice and school curricula, to work and consumption, to media coverage and political decision making, these institutions encourage people to seek identity and meaning through individual and competitive pursuits instead of through collaborative or community endeavours. Watching television and surfing the Internet, advancing in careers, keeping the lawn green, and shopping for fun are only some of the things many people do that divert attention and energy from constructing more meaningful friendships, participating in community life, or recognizing and working to end injustice. It is no coincidence that a self-focused mindset offers more benefits to those who control corporate capitalism and other members of relatively privileged groups than to the vast numbers who congregate in shopping malls and football stadiums or search for anonymous on-line community.

That mainstream psychology's Westernized, individualistic worldview accepts and even endorses isolating, self-focused endeavours has not gone unnoticed. A surprisingly large literature explores the serious consequences (for a sampling of perspectives in the psychological literature, see Bakan, 1966; Prilleltensky, 1994; Sarason, 1981; Teo, 2005). Of particular concern is that an individualistic worldview hinders mutuality, connectedness, and psychological sense of community, partly by leading people to believe that these are either unattainable or unimportant (Fox, 1985; Sarason, 1974). It also blinds people to the impact of their actions and lifestyles on others who remain oppressed, on the environment, and even on families and friends. Overall, psychologists fit too comfortably within a capitalist democratic system that gives lip service to both individual freedom and political equality but in practice prefers political apathy and the freedom of the market over participatory democracy and distributive justice (Baritz, 1974; Fox, 1985, 1996; Pilgrim, 1992).

Psychology's embeddedness in capitalism, Teo suggests (Chapter 3), conflicts with its potential as an emancipatory science. Capitalism is not the only destructive force at play in the world, but its assumptions are perhaps the most dependent on an individualistic worldview that sees economic class as a natural

rather than constructed state of affairs (see Heather Bullock and Wendy Limbert's Chapter 13). Of course, mainstream psychologists defend their field's individualistic orientation by defining psychology as the study of individuals, contrasting it with disciplines such as sociology and anthropology that examine larger groups. Although this explanation seems reasonable, it oversimplifies. Psychologists trying to make sense of why an individual behaves in a certain manner, holds certain views, or seeks certain goals, inevitably confront the direct and indirect impact of other people. But even mainstream social psychology, the traditional discipline most likely to address interaction and social context, has become increasingly individualistic, as Frances Cherry recounts in Chapter 6.

Imagine a therapist whose client suffers from the kind of 'work stress' Jeanne Marecek and Rachel Hare-Mustin describe in their critical discussion of clinical psychology (Chapter 5). Should the clinician investigate the client's long-term psychological difficulties? Teach stress-management techniques? Try to change the stressful job situation or advise the client to get a new job? The psychologist offering therapy (or teaching students about this topic, or conducting research on it) might consider a number of factors, one of which – an important one – is the therapeutic setting's constraints. Is the psychologist in private practice, helping an upper-management professional cope with subordinates? Does she or he work at a clinic, providing therapy for an overloaded working-class secretary with relatively few options? Or at a factory, hired by corporate management to make sure workers keep up the pace?

Different roles lead to different interpretations of the problem and, as Scot Evans and Colleen Loomis emphasize in Chapter 22, different problem interpretations lead to different kinds of solutions. Evans and Loomis pay particular attention to the relevant *level of analysis*, as do Bullock and Limbert in their discussion of social class (Chapter 13). Thus, in the case of our stressed-out client, a critical therapist might step back from the client's individual personality and habits (the *individual level of analysis*) and even from the specific work setting (the *situational or interpersonal level*) to consider the *societal level of analysis*. Gazi Islam and Michael Zyphur point out in their discussion of industrial/organizational psychology (Chapter 7) that treating work stress as a medical problem means solutions focus on individual rather than systems change. Learning to relax or finding a less-stressful job, even when successful, does nothing to change the system generating so much stress to begin with. Individual therapy may still be warranted; Isaac Prilleltensky, Ora Prilleltensky, and Courte Voorhees describe in Chapter 21 how critically minded therapists can adopt approaches less restricted by mainstream assumptions. But the critical psychologist simultaneously aims higher, at the level of community change Evans and Loomis describe and at broader political efforts such as those Vicky Steinitz and Elliot Mishler describe (Chapter 23), among others.

George Albee (1990) pointed out the absurdity of defining as 'individual' any problem that confronts thousands and even millions of people. Beyond the absurdity lies 'blame-the-victim' politics (Ryan, 1971). Blaming individuals for their widely shared problems and legitimizing only individual solutions such as

therapy, education, or stress-management training makes people less likely to advocate social change. Psychology's reconfiguration of social problems into psychic maladies thus reinforces the conservative notion that there's no need to change the system when you can change the person instead (Fox, 1985; Prilleltensky, 1994; Teo, 2005).

Because it is so far-reaching, the implications of psychology's individualistic worldview are especially relevant to some of the field's subdisciplines; so are other concerns and concepts introduced in this chapter such as ideology and the appropriate level of analysis. Some of this book's contributors, thus, describe how mainstream and critical psychologists bring different assumptions and methods to particular areas of interest. These include personality theories (Tod Sloan, Chapter 4); clinical psychology (Jeanne Marecek and Rachel Hare-Mustin, Chapter 5); social psychology (Frances Cherry, Chapter 6); industrial-organizational psychology (Gazi Islam and Michael Zyphur, Chapter 7); community psychology (Isaac Prilleltensky and Geoffrey Nelson, Chapter 8); health psychology (Kerry Chamberlain and Michael Murray, Chapter 9); and psychology and law (Bruce Arrigo and Dennis Fox, Chapter 10). Unfortunately, there was not enough room to include other disciplines that appeared in the first edition (Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997): developmental psychology, intelligence testing, crosscultural psychology, political psychology, lesbian and gay psychology, and ethics in psychology.

---

*inequality and oppression: the role of ideology*

---

Critical psychologists understand that overemphasizing values related to individualism and competitiveness disproportionately hurts members of relatively powerless groups. Equally damaging is the assumption that what's good for the Westernized world is best for everyone, a point Huygens emphasizes in discussing representative democracy's oppressive impact on indigenous cultures (Chapter 16). Modern nation-states, especially those describing themselves as democracies, formally guarantee political and legal equality, but political, legal, and economic power are not equally divided. Thus, critical psychologists explore mainstream psychology's participation in maintaining disadvantage and oppression on the basis of obvious categories such as race (Kevin Durrheim, Derek Hook, and Damien Riggs, Chapter 12); social class (Heather Bullock and Wendy Limbert, Chapter 13); gender (Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, Chapter 14); and disability (Ora Prilleltensky, Chapter 15). They also increasingly explore psychology's role in a world shifting from colonization to globalization (Ingrid Huygens, Chapter 16) and in communities emerging from war where mainstream trauma efforts fail to incorporate a focus on human rights and social justice (Brinton Lykes and Erzulie Coquillon, Chapter 17). And as Michael McCubbin explains (Chapter 18), critical psychologists have also begun to examine oppression inside the mental health system that employs so many psychologists.



Sometimes inequality and oppression are obvious, making these forms of injustice relatively easy to identify and (at least for those at a safe distance) to oppose (see, e.g., Huygens' description of colonizers' imposition of capitalist land ownership on indigenous peoples). Other times they are institutionalized in subtle ways, making it harder both to understand their operation and to combat their presence; that's what happens, for example, when legal systems follow procedurally correct rules that mask substantive injustice (see Arrigo and Fox, in Chapter 10). In either case, dominant individuals and groups maintain their power at the expense of others even when they think their actions are merely 'normal' and 'traditional' rather than unfair or oppressive (Prilleltensky, 2008). This normalization assumption complicates efforts to sort our way through complex global issues using our own (culturally derived) sense of universal principles of social justice (e.g., Fox, 2008a; Fox & Prilleltensky, 2002).

Maintaining an unequal social order requires ideological persuasion. *Ideology* has different meanings in different contexts (Prilleltensky & Fox, 2007). Most critical psychologists use the term generally in its traditional Marxist sense, referring to widely disseminated beliefs that political elites call upon to justify an unfair society and thus blunt criticism of the status quo – or, as Sloan puts in discussing personality theories (Chapter 4), 'ideas or images that sustain unjust social relations'. Some ideological beliefs eventually fade away; today it is hard to imagine ordinary people accepting the notion that kings rule by divine right. Other beliefs persist, however, and new ones come into play. For example, institutional power still relies upon widespread ideological assumptions, often social psychological in nature – for example, that people generally get what they deserve and thus people are poor because they don't work hard; that a capitalist economic system is best because human beings are inherently selfish and competitive; and that the government always goes to war for good reasons. While not universal, agreement with the dominant ideology's institutionalized beliefs represents what many critics consider *false consciousness*, a Marxist term referring to widespread acceptance of inaccurate ideological beliefs (see Chapter 4). By teaching that the source of most oppression and inequality is individual or interpersonal rather than societal and political – 'bad apples' rather than a 'bad system' – institutions such as schools, religious bodies, courts, political parties, and the media deflect movements for social change. Most authors in this book emphasize the role of ideology in this sense.

Some writers use the term more broadly. Over time, ideology became associated in public discourse with any statement having critical political overtones, ironically allowing those defending the status quo to dismiss as 'ideological' challenges from the left end of the political spectrum. Mainstream social psychologists and other social scientists broadened the meaning even further to refer to any system of beliefs and values as a synonym for a general worldview. This even-handed, depoliticized usage, according to which everyone 'has' an ideology, can make any strong beliefs seem somewhat suspect, thus reinforcing the notion that only those in the conventional middle

see things clearly (Fox, 2008a). Of course, making claims such as these frequently brings accusations from mainstream psychologists that our criticisms are ideological, and thus somehow suspect and illegitimate. In our view, the mainstream's focus on individualism is itself ideological. Indeed, the emergence at the end of the twentieth century of a 'positive psychology' that completely disregards critiques of individualizing social problems illustrates the dominant ideology's continuing strength (Pawelski & Prilleltensky, 2005).

A primary goal of critical psychology, accordingly, is to identify and reveal ideological messages and related practices that direct our attention away from the sources of elite power and privilege. According to Michel Foucault (1980), whose influential work many of this book's contributors cite, we need to understand power relations to determine morality. And because power does not reside in social structures alone, we must also explore more fluid non-institutional forms of power. The capitalist's power over the labourer is but one form. Power also resides in interpersonal exchanges, in daily acts of resistance, and in the very language we use, including how we draw a line between personal and social phenomena (see Hepburn and Jackson's discussion of discursive psychology in Chapter 11). Throughout this book, thus, you will see contributors discuss various methods of consciousness raising, often referring to the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970). Freire's emphasis on developing *critical consciousness* has had enormous impact in helping the oppressed break through ideological defenses of the status quo and identify the source of their oppression.

---

*intention and consequence: the trap of neutrality*

---

Many psychologists are motivated by positive values and political commitments to study psychology in the first place. True, some knowingly use their professional skills and status to help elite segments of society retain control. Steinitz and Mishler (Chapter 23) describe one such instance: psychologists' participation in interrogation techniques using torture. But, as Ben Harris especially emphasizes (Chapter 3), even though psychology has been used repressively, many psychologists have embraced its liberatory potential. The problem, as noted above, is that too many psychologists identify their task in overly narrow terms: helping clients on an individual basis or increasing scientific knowledge about traditionally framed topics using traditional research practices. Many support relatively minor reforms they consider 'responsible' and 'practical', while their professional associations increasingly enter the political arena to advocate particular public policies (Herman, 1995), generally consistent with liberal-to-moderate political reform (Fox, 1993b).

Bullock and Limbert point out that mainstream psychologists have not yet embraced *reflexivity*, a conscious exploration of how our own values and assumptions affect our theoretical and methodological goals, activities, and interpretations. Instead, they conform to professional norms portraying psychology as an objective science, neutral in values and politics. Psychology's

main policy job, according to those norms, is to provide impartial scientific knowledge for a rock-no-boats, data-hungry public. This emphasis on data rather than on values and power (itself a value preference, as Teo points out) leads in conventional rather than system-challenging directions. Professional status and job demands, narrow preferences of granting agencies, external political pressures and commitments, and the hope that policy makers will actually pay attention to our research, channel psychologists away from topics and conclusions that might shake things up.

Psychology shares this establishment orientation with professions such as education, law, and medicine. Norms typically reflect the values, assumptions, and interests of older middle- and upper-class professionals, particularly (still) those who are white and male. As in any professional field, advanced training transforms would-be do-gooders into cautious professionals who internalize the field's substantive, social, and political limits (Schmidt, 2000). Teaching what is legitimate and what is not, it restricts more far-reaching ideals. It directs students toward easily manageable research projects consisting all too often of trivial variations of past work unlikely to advance either significant scientific knowledge or transformative social justice. And so, as we shift the gaze from intentions to more important consequences, we ask a number of questions: Does a mainstream stance mislead people – both psychologists and the general public – into identifying systemic problems as purely individual? Does restricting interventions to those that are manageable – and fundable – within professionally convenient timeframes hinder more significant possibilities? Does failing to pursue more fundamental solutions discourage work toward more transformative change and thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy?

In comparison with fields such as anthropology, sociology, history, and even law, psychology is especially resistant to acknowledging that social science is neither neutral nor value free (Rein, 1976). By reshaping their account of psychology's history, Harris tells us (Chapter 2), mainstream courses make it seem as if psychological questions are always answered purely logically. But we know that personal, professional, and political biases affect which research questions we ask, which methodology we use, which conclusions we reach, and which policy recommendations we advocate (see Wendy Stainton Rogers' methodology discussion in Chapter 20). Hiding those choices to match an objective and neutral pose rather than acknowledging them leads to political timidity. The pro forma phrase researchers commonly append to published articles – 'more research needs to be done' – implies that no question can ever be resolved. After all, we don't yet have enough data! And we never will!

---

### central dilemmas

---

The world of critical psychology is larger and more diversified than it was a dozen years ago when this book's first edition appeared. As you might expect given its identity as a critical alternative, that world remains largely distant

from mainstream psychology's core. Despite this marginality, though, there is more room today than in the past for critical psychology scholarship, critical psychology education, and even critical psychology practice. New books (including many written by this book's contributors) explore various arenas of the expanding terrain. Other indications of critical psychology's growth range from conferences, journals, and courses to organizations, websites, and blogs. Although most critical psychologists still find themselves relatively isolated within traditional institutions and most psychology students have trouble finding professors who appreciate, or even know about, critical psychology, the field's expansion makes us less lonely on the national, international, and virtual levels. A special issue of the *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* describes developments in many parts of the world (Dafermos, Marvakis & Triliva, 2006).

This expansion also has a practical downside: increased theoretical and methodological diversity makes critical psychology somewhat more confusing than it seemed not so long ago. There are overlapping and competing notions of what critical psychology is about and what it should be about (directly addressed, for example, by Teo in Chapter 3 and Cherry in Chapter 6). Some notions are especially conducive to exploring particular concerns. For example, some of psychology's discriminatory norms are easier to grasp when focusing on issues of sex and gender, making a feminist analysis particularly fitting. At the same time, neo-Marxism is more directly relevant to issues of economic class and power. This book's 35 contributors refer to these and other intellectual traditions: German critical psychology, South American liberation psychology, social constructionism, discursive psychology, postmodernism, anarchism, critical race theory, and more. All find a place within critical psychology to the extent that they aim to eliminate oppression and promote social justice. But the multiplicity of approaches and jargons does make it harder to keep track of the terrain.

It also contributes to a number of dilemmas. Today, less often defining our work simply by its departure from traditional norms, critical psychologists more often wrestle with competing positions. From the theoretical and methodological to the political and personal, our choices come into sharper relief. Some of these choices divide psychologists more generally, differing from one another as they do, for example, about whether human beings are primarily rational or irrational. Other dilemmas concern critical psychologists more directly, such as whether – despite our suspicion of psychology's claimed scientific authority – we should use our professional status to boost our credibility. For both sorts of dilemmas, no single answer satisfies critical psychology as a whole. As individuals working in critical psychology, as a group of professionals engaged in a discipline, and as members of the flawed societies we are working to change, we each must sort out just what needs to be done.

In trying to get a sense of what brings people to critical psychology, Sloan (2000) asked 20 critical psychologists to reflect on their background as well as on their sense of the field. Among other things, he asked 'What are the big

debates in critical psychology? What issues remain to be resolved?' In this section we build on our own answers to that question (Fox, 2000; Prilleltensky, 2000) as well as on Austin and Prilleltensky's (2001) more systematic approach and on important work by other scholars (e.g., Hepburn, 2003). We loosely divide our dilemmas into the two overlapping categories noted above: *the nature of human nature*, consisting primarily of choices facing psychologists in general; and *the scope of social change and political action*, a topic particularly important to critical psychologists. Many of this book's contributors address one or more of these dilemmas, sometimes explicitly but other times just beneath the surface.

---

*the nature of human nature*

---

After describing how critical psychologists 'do theory', Tod Sloan asks this:

**What sorts of assumptions about psyche and society would best guide critical theorizing? What common assumptions are problematic? What positions on the old questions – such as free will vs. determinism, nature vs. nurture, consciousness vs. unconscious forces – are most appropriate for critical psychology? What new questions will need to be addressed? (Chapter 19)**

As you can see, we have questions, but not yet answers!

One of critical psychology's key distinguishing assumptions is that our subjectivity, our psychological world, is deeply embedded in our culture and social practices. Our wants, needs and desires reflect the norms and expectations we absorb as members of a particular tribe, group or community. Awareness of this embeddedness helps explain why we reject mainstream psychology's exclusive focus on the individual and interpersonal levels of analysis and also raise our sights to the societal level.

This awareness also leads us toward reflexive exploration of our own wants, needs, and desires. Which flow from our inner self, if such a self exists, and which from a culture that, strictly speaking, does not exist outside ourselves but that we and other members of society have created? And although we emphasize the individual's socially embedded nature, we also see – and we seek to strengthen – sparks of agency and resistance that allow us to change our personal lives and communities. Critical psychologists struggle to locate themselves within this dialectic between determinism and free will (Teo, 2005).

Again like mainstream psychologists, critical psychologists also manoeuvre between the conflicting legacies of the hyper-rational person resembling a computer and the thoroughly irrational being modelled on Freudian conceptions. A rational person, at least according to mainstream economic theory and certain psychological perspectives, makes decisions based purely on logical calculation of costs and benefits. An irrational person, on the other hand, acts by passion and instinct. Subjectively we know we have both tendencies, but we also know that subjectivity can lead us astray.

As noted in Sloan's discussions of theory and Arrigo and Fox's chapter on psychology's intersection with law, some critical psychologists use aspects of psychoanalysis to inform our understanding of subjectivity and rationality (e.g., Oliver, 2004; Parker, 1997). The concepts of the conscious and the unconscious can help explain how cultural injunctions traverse the individual-society nexus. And they raise questions: If unconscious forces drive our social, ethical, and political behaviour, do our attempts to be helpful or to advocate social change simply indicate a stratagem to gain praise and recognition or some other unconscious urge? Are our political commitments nothing more than selfish and irrational pursuits? Yet, even if so, what is the alternative? Deconstructing the human experience, interpreting it according to abstract models, risks stripping our existence of meaning. It also makes social change less likely.

---

*the scope of social change and political action*

---

Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun remind us that social change is not a primary goal of all critical psychologists (Chapter 14). Kerry Chamberlain and Michael Murray, noting disagreement about whether critical health psychology 'should focus on revealing disparity and disadvantage or on changing it' (Chapter 9), point out that narrative and discursive research emphasize the former and action research the latter (Alexa Hepburn and Clare Jackson describe discursive psychology in Chapter 11). Despite this political diversity, we think it fair to say that most critical psychologists believe something is fundamentally wrong with a discipline that not only fails to challenge unjust societal practices but actually reinforces them, and something is foundationally wrong with social systems that exclude, alienate, and oppress masses of people. The internal debate in critical psychology is not so much whether social change is needed but what level of change to seek and how to bring that change about. Positions on this issue reflect a confluence of influences from the political and personal to the professional and pragmatic.

A conscious reflexive stance reminds us that the surrounding environment affects what we do. That environment includes the traditional academic settings that employ most self-defined critical psychologists. Academia offers a number of advantages, not just practical benefits such as professional status, schedule flexibility, and opportunities for travel but also the important norm that intellectual exploration is part of the job. Our generally comfortable and privileged work environment, however, imposes a variety of formal and informal limits, some of which lead to what Huygens refers to as academia's 'political defeatism' (Chapter 16). These limits especially constrain graduate students looking for jobs and untenured faculty hoping to keep the jobs they have. Both know that remaining in academia, especially in mainstream institutions, requires more than just showing up on time and doing good work.

As is true for jobs in hierarchical settings more generally, it also means pleasing administrators and senior professors. That's a difficult enough task for academics who accept institutional norms, particularly in an era when cost-cutting universities hire part-time faculty to replace full-timers. The task is even more difficult for critical scholars whose work criticizes, implicitly and often explicitly, academic norms in general and their own institution in particular. Critical psychologists who challenge the research, values, and politics of those in their departments and in their administration who have the power to hire and fire often put themselves at professional risk. (Dennis Fox addresses some of these concerns in this book's concluding collection of frequently asked questions.)

Constraints such as these contribute to two kinds of interrelated dilemmas, one personal and one political. The personal dilemma is that academics have more career incentives to write the next article or obtain the next grant than to work more directly for social change. As is true much more widely within the larger society, time-consuming and often stressful work – job-hunting, job-advancement, and just doing a good job – does not leave much room for the political activism most critical psychologists endorse. Beyond the time overload is the pressure to demonstrate professional focus. Senior professors sometimes advise graduate students not to spend much time teaching, which takes time away from more valued career-advancing research and publishing. Some tell younger colleagues that political or community involvement will hurt their job prospects.

Given all this, it can be tempting to decide that our most important contribution is writing books that identify problems for others to solve. Academia's heart, after all, is intellectual, not activist. And as Teo (2005) noted, deconstructing the present state of affairs and offering visions for a better one both fall within the critical tradition. Still, most of us try to find some workable balance between theory and action, between critiquing the world and trying to change it. Teo points out in Chapter 3 that, although increasing knowledge is a legitimate form of action, 'theorizing for the sake of theorizing and research for the sake of research must be considered indulgent practices given that lives and deaths are at stake'.

So we try to merge our critical politics with our professional work, sometimes doing the sorts of politically relevant research and intervention illustrated throughout this book. But adopting a critical methodology as Stainton Rogers describes in Chapter 20 is easier in some subdisciplines than others. For example, the nature of community psychology makes it particularly conducive to approaches such as community-based participatory action research (see, e.g., Chapters 8, 17, and 22).

Contributing to the academic's dilemma is the trap of neutrality we discussed earlier: adapting to mainstream psychology's neutral apolitical persona and believing we need more research before we can advocate significant change. It makes sense to understand the existing system's flaws before we advocate something new. On the other hand, our existing societies have

so many flaws we could spend a lifetime dissecting them. As one of us noted elsewhere, 'Awareness is Good, but Action is Better' (Fox, 2003).

The second dilemma, generated partly by our academic environment but also reflecting broader issues of political philosophy and strategy, is determining the level of appropriate action. As Prilleltensky and Nelson note (Chapter 8), and as reflected in many other chapters, there is an important distinction between *ameliorative* practices – for example, those that tend to the wounded, care for the disabled, and treat the infirm – and *transformative* practices that aim instead to change systems that wound and marginalize so many in the first place. Critical psychologists accuse mainstream psychology of being almost exclusively ameliorative, focusing on therapy for the distressed, policy research aimed at minor reform, and similar limited-horizon endeavours. Given these criticisms, should critical psychologists abandon the ameliorative realm and only embrace more far-reaching transformation? In practice, it's not always easy to identify transformative efforts, or to determine what role we might play within them (see Steinitz and Mishler's related discussion of the politics of resistance). We don't always agree among ourselves, for example, whether a particular project is truly transformative or merely ameliorative at a higher level. It does seem clear that, at least in the short-term, amelioration most quickly helps those in need even if that help is more limited than psychology's emancipatory or liberatory potential might envision. Even conditions less dire than the kind Lykes and Coquillon address in communities emerging from war (Chapter 17) demand practical response.

Describing critical psychology's philosophical terrain, Teo notes that 'in critical thought one can find ethical-political orientations that range from left-liberal progressive to radical' (Chapter 3). A number of this book's authors, falling along different points of this continuum, address the resulting political dilemma. Some describe how traditional research methods firmly embedded in mainstream psychology's *positivist* worldview have helped marginalized or oppressed people in significant ways (e.g., Ora Prilleltensky's chapter on disability, Cherry's on social psychology). Indeed, Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), whose development of liberation psychology many contributors point to as a model, used traditional survey methods to advance liberation. Can we call these crucial efforts 'critical'? Does critical psychology's focus on 'transformative change' going to 'the root of the problem' place it only at the radical end of the political spectrum, or can political liberals and progressives who seek pragmatic reforms also be 'critical'? If so, how might we distinguish them from their progressive but 'non-critical' peers?

Perhaps there is more distance than we sometimes like to think between a theoretically, methodologically, and politically consistent 'critical psychology' and a messier, more inconsistent 'psychology of social justice'. In Chapter 2, Ben Harris uses perceptions and misperceptions about the history of psychology to remind us that dichotomous thinking can lead even critical psychologists astray. Definitions are tricky. Our dilemmas persist.



---

## organizing matters

---

Part I of *Critical Psychology: An Introduction*, **Critical Overviews**, continues with two chapters. The first offers pointers on how to read the history of mainstream psychology; the second introduces critical psychology's basic philosophical concepts, many of which return in several guises throughout the book. Part II, **Critical Disciplines**, describes in some detail the place of critical psychology in eight specific subfields. These chapters highlight varying critiques of the mainstream approaches you may have encountered in traditional courses and alternative approaches appropriate to each subdiscipline. In Part III, **Critical Social Issues**, seven chapters explore arenas for social action motivating significant work in critical psychology across a range of subdisciplines. The five chapters in Part IV, **Critical Practice**, explore how psychologists go about their daily work as theoreticians, researchers, practitioners, community change agents, and political activists.

The 23 chapters complement one another as they answer our primary question: How can psychology foster emancipation, social justice, and social change? Each presents a different piece of the puzzle or a different way of looking at the whole picture. Some examine broad themes running through psychology as a whole, others a relatively narrow segment. The book's structure enables professors to assign it either as a supplemental text in mainstream courses or as a main text in critical psychology courses. The chapters cover traditional subject areas, so that readers looking for material applicable to specific courses can easily locate relevant information. This organizational system does have a disadvantage, however: it maintains distinctions among different areas of psychology that critical psychologists insist are artificial. Disciplinary boundaries that seem distinct on paper make it difficult to see real connections among different areas, such as between social psychology and clinical psychology, or between methods and theory. That is why you will see different authors address common themes using slightly different lenses.

No chapter can describe all the meaningful critical work that has preceded us. In this new edition, every chapter ends with a short summary, a glossary of important terms, suggested readings and Internet resources, and questions for discussion. The reading suggestions point you to larger literatures, more detailed discussions, and fascinating tangents. You should also keep in mind that there was not enough room to include chapters on every subdiscipline and every issue. To expand this edition's scope to critical social issues and critical practice, we had to leave behind chapter-length coverage of important topics that appeared in the first edition. Some of those topics are addressed elsewhere in this book, but for others we urge you to locate a used first edition (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997).

We know that delving into new literatures marked by sometimes confusing and unfamiliar language can be intimidating. As scholars working mostly within academic settings, we usually follow academic norms and write for others who expect and even admire academic jargon and styles. Despite our

reflexive and critical stance, we develop some bad habits! Still, we have tried throughout this book to limit obscure language, make our sentence structure less imposing, and define key terms. Although we sometimes found it impossible to remove specialized terminology without altering the substance as well, we think you will find this book reasonably accessible.

After a century of manipulating variables in laboratories, the field still has not fundamentally altered the status quo. We need research that can teach us how to transform real societies. We need action. And we need your help.

---

### ■ ■ main chapter points ■

---

- 1 Critical psychology refers to a number of overlapping approaches that challenge mainstream psychology's implicit and explicit support for an unjust and unsatisfying status quo.
- 2 Psychology's negative impacts occur despite the good intentions of most psychologists.
- 3 Central concerns fall into several categories: individualism and meaninglessness; inequality and oppression; and unintended consequences.
- 4 Central concepts include level of analysis; the role of ideology; and the trap of neutrality.
- 5 Critical psychologists differ among themselves about a number of dilemmas, which we discuss here in two categories: those facing psychologists in general related to the nature of human nature, and those facing critical psychologists most directly related to the scope of social change.

---

### glossary

---

- **critical psychology:** a variety of approaches that challenge assumptions, values, and practices within mainstream psychology that help maintain an unjust and unsatisfying status quo.
- **ideology:** generally, a worldview or set of assumptions about how a society works; more strictly, the set of ideas inculcated by dominant sectors of society to justify elite power and the society's established institutions.
- **level of analysis:** the scope of generalization in thinking about relevant behaviours, from the narrowest (individual level) through the middle (interpersonal or situational level) to the broadest (structural or societal level).
- **mainstream psychology:** psychology as practised by the field's dominant professional institutions and its professionals.
- **positivism:** the philosophical position that progress comes only from logical, objective application of the formal scientific method.

---

## ■ ■ reading suggestions ■

---

For accounts of critical psychology's development in different countries, see *Critical Psychology in a Changing World*, a special issue of the *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* (Dafermos et al., 2006, online at [www.discourseunit.com/arcip/5.htm](http://www.discourseunit.com/arcip/5.htm)). Sloan (2000) provides stories by two dozen critical psychologists who relate their personal backgrounds to their perspectives on psychology and social justice. Several introductory texts examine various subfields, e.g. social psychology (Hepburn, 2003; Tuffin, 2004); community psychology (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005); health psychology (Murray, 2004). Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) discuss critical psychology applications to a variety of fields. We also strongly recommend Sampson (1983), Sarason (1981), and Martín-Baró (1994).

---

## : // internet resources /

---

- **Critical Psychology International:** [criticalpsychology.com](http://criticalpsychology.com)
- **Dennis Fox's Critical Psychology** – resources, readings, links, frequently asked questions: [dennisfox.net/critpsy/](http://dennisfox.net/critpsy/)
- **RadPsyNet** – Radical Psychology Network co-founded 1993 by Dennis Fox and Isaac Prilleltensky – includes online *Radical Psychology Journal*: [radpsynet.org](http://radpsynet.org)

## ■ ■ Questions ■

---

- 1 How often do mainstream psychology courses address issues raised by critical psychologists? Are most mainstream psychologists familiar with critical psychology?
- 2 How can psychology help advance social change?
- 3 Is critical psychology really political activism?