All too Human? Rethinking the Contemporary Community Psychology Subject

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In this brief 'reply' to Niki Harré's Let's assume people are good: rethinking research in community psychology published in volume 30. No 1, pages 81-91 of Australian Community Psychologist (Harré, 2019), we firstly focus-in on Harré's claim that 'critical approaches to community psychology' generally, and Fryer and Laing (2008) in particular, tend not to distinguish between the functioning of systems and the people who instantiate systems. We then widen our focus to examine Harré's assumptions about the fundamental goodness, worth and dignity of people. Thirdly, we critically examine Harré's broader project of 'humanistic community psychology'.

Systems and Instantiators of Systems

Niki Harré (2019, p. 83) claims that the "separation of what a system functions to do from the people involved, is a move that may sometimes be missed, or seen as unnecessary, in critical approaches to community psychology", emphasising the importance of not allowing "suspicion of systems to morph into a blanket suspicion of those we see as benefitting from these systems". She claims to illustrate this failing by offering, as an example:

> …an article by David Fryer and Adele Laing (Fryer and Laing, 2008) that offers a critical community psychology approach" (which) "states that they are 'ultimately interested' in 'critical questions' that concern who has . . . authority and whose interests are served.

The reader of Harré (2019) might be forgiven for assuming that advocates for critical approaches to community psychology in general, and Fryer and Laing (2008) in particular, suspiciously, cynically even, focus attention rigidly on powerful individuals who benefit from systems rather than on the systems themselves, other and decontextualise those individuals and, in the process, as pawns of neoliberalism, simplistically inscribe moral denunciation directed at "self-interested" "power holders"

in such a morally problematic fashion, that a counter-response was still called for eleven years after the Fryer and Laing publication. Indeed, as Fryer and Laing's article is offered merely as "an example" of "critical approaches to community psychology" more generally, approaches to community psychology which are "critical" are all tarred by Harré (2019) with the same denunciatory brush.

By page 86, Harré (2019) is claiming that "the self-interested individual", with which she has suggested Fryer and Laing (2008) are ultimately interested, is central to "the neoliberal narrative" which "stifles action for the common good" and which her own research is "aimed at challenging". Harré (2019, p.83) further claims that "this emphasis on who does and who does not benefit from the status quo" increases the risk that "the nuance, potential and constraints on the actual people involved may slip away in the rigidity by which they are categorised". Harré returns to this claim at the end of the paper, on page 89, by repeating that: "too much emphasis on power *holders* [. . .] turns our endeavour into an us / them game" and she discursively positions her own paper as intended to "encourage readers to consider if, and how, their discourse and research practice has fallen into stylised moves that are weighed

down with methodological correctness, suspicion or self-doubt". Harré amplifies her claims that critical community psychology is characterised by "blanket suspicion" by citing Robbins' (2016, p. 220) claim that "contemporary critical thought" is characterised by "a hermeneutics of suspicion" which assumes "something 'intrinsically aggressive and violent' in the character of human life" (Harré 2019, p.83, citing Robbins 2016, p. 220). Harré (2019) contrasts this with a "hermeneutics of love" which "assumes goodwill in both ourselves and in those we encounter [. . .] is characterised by 'a generosity of spirit'" (Harré 2019, p. 83, citing Robbins 2016, p. 220).

Unable to comment on behalf of the whole of critical community psychology, we address the Fryer and Laing (2008) article in particular, which sought to address the question "What is community psychology?" by problematising the question in a series of sub-manoeuvres, of which the material to which Harré refers directly appeared as only one step. Fryer and Laing gave a sub-summary of the bigger picture:

> The question with which we started out, 'What is community psychology?', has now turned through the process of problematising into a far more complicated and interesting set of questions. What socially constructed and maintained community psychologies, whether explicitly defined or implicit in diverse texts, practices and procedures, can be surfaced? Which accounts are dominant as opposed to subjugated? How has this dominance been achieved and maintained? How are accounts given the status of true knowledge of what is the case, or as we prefer to put it, how are they 'truthed'? What are the power implications of this knowledge? *Which local and wider social, political, economic and other interests are served by these various community psychologies*? (2008, p.8., italics added by the current authors).

The discursive positioning of the whole manoeuvre, of which the section quoted by Harré was a sub-manoeuvre, as reinscribing decontextualised psychologistic individualism rather than systemic analysis makes little sense in the context of the whole article. Moreover, in those eleven years between the publication of Fryer and Laing (2008) and Harré (2019), many other publications explicating and refining the ideas introduced in Fryer and Laing (2008), i.e. explicating a Foucauldian-influenced, anti-individualistic, anti-psy-complex and anti-neoliberal austerity position, have been published but are not cited in Harré (2019). See, for example: Coimbra et al. (2012); Evans et al. (2017); Fryer (2018); Fryer and Fox (2015); Fryer and Stambe (2014); Jeffrey (2019); Marley and Fryer (2014).

Note that Harré's implication that the position of Fryer and Laing (2008) in particular and "contemporary critical thought"(Robbins 2016 p, 220 as quoted in Harré 2019, p. 83) in general, is characterised by a "hermeneutics of suspicion", in the sense of Robbins (2016), because assuming "hidden meanings and something 'intrinsically aggressive and violent in the character of human life'" (Harré 2019 p. 83 citing Robbins 2016 p. 220), reveals Harré herself to be deploying an individualistic, psychologistic, frame of reference.

We now turn from criticisms of Harré's reading of Fryer and Laing (2008) to a reading of Harré s own paper and in particular a critical scrutiny of Harré's own interlocking claims about 'goodness', 'worth' and 'love' in it.

The fundamental goodness, worth and dignity of people

Central to Harré's position is: "the fundamental assumption that people are good" (Harré, 2019, p. 83) and her assumptions of "the (profound) worth of all people". Harré (2019, p. 83) refers to "the dignity, worth or well-being of the person" as if the same thing. Elsewhere, Harré (2019, p. 83) writes of "human dignity and goodness". For Harré: "there isn't a definitive intellectual or empirical route into

the core assumptions of . . . community psychology". Rather, "the assumption that people are of profound worth and thus carry dignity, is . . . based on an even more fundamental assumption that people are good" (Harré, 2019, p. 83).

As noted above, Harré (2019) characterises her approach as one inscribing a "hermeneutics of love", which assumes goodwill in self and others and is characterised by "a generosity of spirit". This is built on a rejection of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" which Harré claims characterises critical approaches to community psychology. The phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" can be traced back to the French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur (1913 – 2005). However, Ricoeur's writing about the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (e.g. Ricoeur, 1970) are generally regarded as starkly contrasting with the characterisation of it by Harré. Harré introduces the notion of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" via a secondary source (Robbins, 2016, p. 231) which traduces Ricoeur's concept by implying it has an orientation to interpretation from a "mood of fear". This is not the usual interpretation when Ricoeur's work itself is examined. Ricoeur (1970) does, indeed, talk about destruction and iconoclasm, but "so as to let speak what once, what each time, was said, when meaning appeared anew" (p. 27). Ricoeur's vision is one where we see beneath the surface of things and refuse to accept first impressions or trust our senses. Seeing the world anew requires a challenge to the status quo and, like any good omelette will require the breaking of a few eggs: but it is not fearful, it is hopeful. Ricoeur contrasts willingness to suspect with the "vow of obedience". There is nothing "fearful" about suspicion for Ricoeur: it is liberating, anti-authoritarian, disobedient, it celebrates diverse understandings and interpretations; it is a product of humanism, not its antithesis. Unlike Harré, Ricoeur is usually taken to argue that the antithesis of suspicion is faith, not love: "The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith . . . faith that has undergone criticism" (p. 28). To "assume people are good" as Harré asks the reader to

do, is not to ask them to engage in an act of love, but in an act of faith; faith in the essential goodness of human beings which, it is claimed, for Harré, is self-evident and beyond critique.

Harré's broader project within the critical frame of reference characterising this reply

In asserting "the worth of all people" and assuming all people are good, Harré assumes a universal and essentialised human nature. We are not interested *here* in endorsing Harré's reification of human nature nor in repudiating it but in critically examining Harré's theoretical coherence.

When debating *Human nature: Justice versus power* (Foucault & Chomsky, 1971), Noam Chomsky also argued in favour of the existence of a universal essential human nature, something "unchangeable, a foundation for whatever it is we do . . .". Foucault, in contrast, by-passed the issue of whether human nature 'exists', instead asking what role "the notion of human nature" has "played" in "the history of knowledge"? Foucault answers that it has "played the role of an epistemological indicator to designate certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history". This answer also applies to Harré's inscription of human nature. Harré discursively positioned her assumptions of the goodness, worth and dignity of people, and thus humanist community psychology, as underpinned by "faith" (Harré, 2019, p. 81), "a calling" (Harré, 2019, p. 83) and a "vision" (Harré, 2019, p. 81). It is surely no coincidence that Robbins (2016, p. 231), attempting to identify 'servants' of the hermeneutics of love which Harré advocates, lists a series of iconic religious leaders, including amongst others: the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, St. Francis of Assisi and Thich Nhat Hahn.

The emphasis on faith, scripture and obedience was however anathema to the main strands of enlightenment humanism. Humanist free thinkers were hostile to religious belief and free thinking, itself, became a form of resistance to authority,

religious or otherwise. A key principle was that one must not be required to accept dogma. A humanist does not believe a moral system can rest solely on authority, whether human or divine. Moreover, love and suspicion are not in opposition for humanists but are united in a sensitive process of care: careful examination of being. Humanists should be suspicious of love itself:

> "Many suspect that love offers us the image of an encounter with otherness while actually providing an opportunity for us to love our own ego through the other. From this perspective, love functions as an alibi for narcissism." (McGowan, 2018, p. 7).

Love has also been characterised by critical thinkers such as Žižek as a form of violence or a personification of evil (Žižek, 2016). It is, ironically in the context of Harré's project, the hermeneutic of suspicion that is closest to the humanist project, a "procedure of demystification", "a way of extending consciousness"; "the man of suspicion carries out in reverse the falsification of the man of guile . . . guile will be met by double guile" (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 34). Doubt and suspicion are the heart of humanism; not faith and obedience. Humanistic community psychology, as represented by Harré (2019), inscribes a problematic reading of humanism. Moreover, it is a hermeneutic of suspicion rather than a hermeneutic of love which emerges from humanist thinking - contrary to the claims of Harré (2019). The hermeneutic of suspicion is Nietzschean, atheistic, rebellious. The hermeneutic of suspicion can be productive and creative, reading texts (people and communities) against the grain, identifying omissions, challenging hierarchies and authoritarianism. The hermeneutic of suspicion fits comfortably with the doubting, suspicion, questioning and problematising of critical thinking. The hermeneutic of love, on the other hand, is incompatible with humanism.

Harré makes repeated claims about the trinity of worth, goodness and dignity of all people but also claims that the worth or goodness of all people cannot be known through intellectual or empirical means.

Rather Harré positions such 'knowledge' as based on a "fundamental assumption", a "calling", a "mantra", an "act of faith", i.e. discursively positioning of them as inherent truths whilst simultaneously stripping away cultural, political, theological and historical context. Harré positions her own version of humanistic community psychology research as "research aimed at challenging the neoliberal narrative of the self-interested individual" (Harré, 2019, p. 86) and as "strongly aligned" with decolonising approaches. Yet, whilst proclaiming herself a critic of neoliberal ideology, Harré exhorts the reader to adopt the self-same universalising, essentialising, reductionist arguments about human nature adopted by neoliberal ideology, with its dyadic dividing practices but to reverse the binary, replacing the 'human nature traits' of 'badness and selfishness' with the 'human nature traits' of 'goodness and selflessness'. Arguments such as those put forward by Harré whilst superficially challenging neoliberalism, actually, at a deeper level, reinscribe and promote the neoliberal project.

To return finally to Fryer and Laing (2008), we have seen in Harré (2019) an intended step in the social construction of a humanist community psychology based on a series of contentious readings. A humanist approach to community psychology has been discursively positioned as an alternative, characterised by "good will . . . profound respect for, and desire to serve, others" (Harré 2019 p 83), to what is positioned as an approach to community psychology, which is discursively positioned as a manifestation of contemporary critical thought which is "intrinsically aggressive and violent" (Robbins 2016b p. 220 cited in Harré 2019 p. 83) . Ironically, it is critical approaches to community psychology which are actually the victims of relentless brutal attacks from almost every quarter of the Establishment in attempts to close down critique in the academy. The claims of humanist community psychology are 'truthed' not by reference to intellectual or empirical support but by reference to faith, calling, vision and a fundamental assumption of human goodness, dignity and worth. They

appear to be closer to theology than social theory, asserting axiomatic truths and moral absolutes so potently asserted first by the church, then by capitalism and then by neoliberalism, As regards interests served by humanist community psychology, Harré appears to recommend the use of the master's tools to fortify the master's house.

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Paul Duckett is a critical community psychologist who is presently working in an academic role at CQUniversity Townsville, Australia. His research and teaching have focused on disability issues in general and mental health issues in particular and this has involved him working with users of psychological services and governmental organisations to promote the rights of disabled people. He collaborates with other critical scholars to examine and lay bare the cultural and political factors that impact psychologised understandings of mental health and disability, mainstream theories and practices of psychology and reconstructed histories of psychology. Paul's YouTube channel is https://www.youtube.com/c/paulduckett.

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